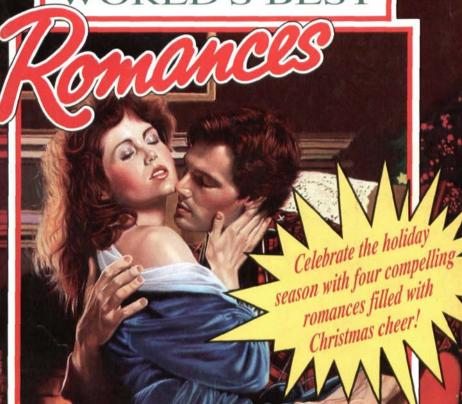
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A Carol Christmas

MURIEL JENSEN

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MURIEL JENSEN

A native of Massachusetts, Muriel now lives Astoria, Oregon, with her husband, who is al a writer, two calico cats and a malamute nam Deadline. She has three grown children. Mur loves investigating restaurants and dress shot in the interest of research.

CELESTE HAMILTON

Celeste Hamilton has been writing since she was ten years old. The broadcast media captured her interest in high school, and she graduated from the University of Tennessee with a B.S. in communications. Celeste began writing romances in 1985 and now works at her craft full-time. She lives in east Tennessee with her policeman husband, and they enjoy traveling when their busy schedules permit.





JUDITH ARNOLD

With fifty novels to her credit, Judith Arnold is one of Harlequin's premier authors. Her versatility and uncanny ability to make her readers laugh and cry have become her hallmarks. Judith, her husband and two sons make their home in Massachusetts.

NOREEN BROWNLIE

Noreen Brownlie grew up in a large family on the Oregon coast, surrounded by Victorian houses, fishing boats and romantic sunsets. She met her husband while she was working inland as a television writer/producer, and the couple resettled in Seattle where she continues to work in broadcasting and Noreen lives her dream of writing fiction full-time.

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From the desk of Candy Lee, Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader.

The noliday season is upon us once again! It feels so magical—all the sparkling lights and magnificent decorations twinkling in the city and brightening the countryside. The holidays are a special time for the characters in each beautifully written love story in this month's volume of the World's Best Romances!

Tonight I'm going to sit by a nice warm fire, snuggle under my favorite comforter and escape into this special holiday edition of the World's Best Romances where...a baseball pro hits a "home run" with a beautiful mother and her five special charges...a very special lady brings love and the warmth of Christmas to a little boy and his father...a fast-paced man meets his match, beginning a battle that ends in love everafter...holiday cheer brings two hearts the greatest gift of all—each other!

Join me in making this holiday season a time for new beginnings and very happy endings with each exceptional story in this latest volume of the World's Best Romances!

Best wishes,

Carey Lea

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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MURIEL JENSEN A Carol Christmas



Carol was having a hard enough time getting her own life—and the lives of five young orphans left in her charge—back in order. The last thing she needed was a man like Mike, who'd just lost his pro ball career. But one zap of the electricity flowing between them, and Mike was soon up for a whole new ball game!



Carol Shaw walked the dark trail from the cafeteria to the dorm she supervised at Saint Christopher's Home for Children. One moment she was alone, lost in thoughts of other winters, other Christmases. The next, she felt the unmistakable pressure of a gun at her back.

"Don't turn around," a disguised but familiar voice commanded. "I've got a message from the boss."

She froze in her tracks. A bonechilling wind whipped dead leaves around her feet. "What is it?" she asked.

"You're to report to HQ in one hour." Pressure was applied to the gun, and Carol arched her back. "Don't be late," the menacing voice advised, "or I'll soak ya."

Carol turned to confront the messenger and take the yellow plastic water pistol from his hand. The boy of eleven gave up his weapon without complaint. His dark blond hair stood up in moderately moussed spikes that were impervious to the strong wind. Devilish brown eyes smiled at her. Carol had a particular fondness for Frank, despite his vision of himself as a top-level secret agent with license to squirt.

He turned to run up the path, slowing his pace to keep just ahead of her. "Mother Margaret said that she wants to talk to you about the Christmas bazaar. And about some-

body visiting or something. And I don't think she meant Santa Claus."

The other four children who shared their dormitory were coming up the path through the woods from the school, the hoods of their yellow slickers flapping in the wind.

"Rudolph never found his way through the fog to Saint Christopher's Home for Children," Frank concluded.

Carol knew that pain and resentment were hiding behind Frank's smile, but the facade kept him going. A woman who did some of her own best work behind a mask of cheer, Carol understood the value of a measure of pretense.

Carol turned to one of the other children. "Nicky!" He was small and shy, and only just coming out of his shell after five months at the home. "Did you find something to share in show-and-tell?" she asked.

The six-year-old pulled a white mouse out of his coat pocket and held it a fraction of an inch from Carol's face. Nicky's soft dark eyes, filled with admiration and affection for the tiny, wriggling, pink-eyed creature, made her hold her position.

"A mouse," he said. "His name's Kermit."

"Kermit is a frog," Dorcas, the oldest of the girls, pointed out. "That's a dumb name."

"He likes it," Frank said aggressively. "It doesn't matter what you think, Dorky!"

Dorcas, glasses askew, both thick brown ponytails bristling, swung her nylon backpack at his face with remarkable precision. "You're not supposed to call me that!"

"Then don't act like a dork!" he

countered.

"Frank," Carol said firmly, "you owe the kitty another nickel, and Dorie, you must stop hitting." Frank and Dorcas stuck their tongues out at each other, but subsided. The problem of the mouse remained.

"Where did you get Kermit,

Nicky?" Carol asked.

"Kirby Mitchell from Saint Joseph's Dorm." He looked up at her, his dark eyes suddenly grave. "Those guys are leaving next week. He can't take it with him."

Antiquated plumbing and wiring, along with repairs too numerous to be economically feasible, were forcing Saint Christopher's to close its doors. So the children in its care were to be moved to foster homes. Of the home's sixty children, Carol had to deal with the five most difficult to place.

A silence fell over the usually noisy group. They exchanged looks of dread, but no one spoke his or her fear aloud.

"Well, none of us is leaving until February," Carol said cheerfully. "That's two long months, during which we'll have Christmas and Saint Christopher's all to ourselves." "Santa's gonna come?" Kathy, dark-eyed and earnest, spoke with anticipation.

"With presents!" Candy, Kathy's five-year-old sister, jumped up and

down.

Dorcas pushed her glasses back into place and spoke with the air of displaced aristocracy that was her trademark. "My mom and dad always had a tree that touched the ceiling, and it was full of gold and crystal ornaments."

"You're full of . . ."

Carol forestalled Frank's critique with a warning look. "Let's get Kermit settled, then we'll change and go to the playground."

OUT OF THE HOME'S uniform and dressed in play clothes, the children gathered in the kitchen, where Carol put out cookies and milk. Kermit was settled in a clean cage.

"Let's play hide-and-seek instead of going to the playground," Kathy suggested, putting on a jacket. She pulled up her zipper, then turned to Candy, who was struggling with hers. Patiently Kathy removed the threads that were interfering with its operation, then zipped it up.

Kathy and Candy had already been in residence at Saint Christopher's for two months when Carol took the position of dorm mother in February. For nine months, Carol had watched in fascination as eight-year-old Kathy cared for her sister with skill and patience. It was very clear that the mother who had died too young had taught her well. The idea that they might one day be sep-

arated was something Carol refused to even consider.

Candy jumped up and down, endorsing the suggestion that they play hide-and-seek.

Carol pulled the door open. "Last one to the flagpole is 'it'!"

The children laughed, their spirits warm again, despite the bleakness of their prospects and the wintry afternoon.

"I want to be 'it'! I want to be 'it'!" Nicky ran to Carol, pulling on her arm. "Can I be 'it,' Carol?"

Frank rolled his eyes in disgust. "Nicky, being 'it' means you have to do all the work of finding everybody."

Nicky was confused. "But that's fun."

Frank put a hand to his eyes and shook his head. "The kid's hopeless, Carol."

Carol bent down and kissed Nicky's cheek. "Okay, Nick. You're 'it.' Close your eyes." He obliged, and she turned him slowly around while the other children scattered. "Now count to ten."

As he began to tick off the numbers, his eyes scrupulously shut tight, Carol headed into the trees. Now that the six retreat cabins on the grounds were closed, she and the children used them often in their games of hide-and-seek. The closest cabin was hidden by the fat pines, but it was near enough to Nicky that it should occur to him immediately as a possible hiding place. Just as he shouted in a high voice, "Ready or not, here I come!" Carol opened the front door of the cabin.

"WHICH CABIN?"

Mike Rafferty, seated between his brother and his friend in the cab of the pickup, consulted the note in his hand. "Cabin A. That must be it."

The man driving backed through the trees right up to the cabin's small, rough veranda. The porch shook as the back of the truck made contact with it. Mike braced a hand against the dashboard. "God, Slug. Watch what you're doing!"

Slugger Lund looked at his friend with a mockingly reprimanding frown. "Just because your sister runs this place doesn't mean you can talk like a heathen."

As Lund jumped out of the truck, Mike turned to his brother. He had covered his eyes. "Relax, Rick," Mike said. "We're here."

Rick lowered his hand. "You sure it's safe to keep company with this guy?"

"He's the best hitter in the American League. What can I say?"

"I thought you were the best hitter in the American League?"

There was just a moment's pause before Mike replied. "I was. Now Slugger is." As Slugger began single-handedly pulling a small refrigerator out of the back of the truck, Mike stopped him. "Let's go in and reconnoiter, so we don't have to move things around more than once."

Slugger followed Rick and Mike into the cabin. The small living area was furnished with old, random pieces. They were neither chic nor eclectically charming.

Mike took a cursory look around the bedroom, while Rick inspected the drawers of a small dresser and tested the comfort of a chenillecovered double bed.

"This is almost as bad as the visiting-team dugout at Shively Field," Slugger said, leaning an arm on Mike's shoulder. "The offer to stay with Beth and me still holds."

"Thanks, Slug, but I need the time alone."

"It's only the end of your career," Slugger said, "not the end of the world." Slugger was always a little short of the baseline when it came to subtlety and finesse.

Rick turned from the center of the room, an angry criticism of the other man's tactless remark on the tip of his tongue. But Mike stopped him with a look and turned toward the living room. "Let's get the kitchen stuff first."

"Ah ... Mike?"

Mike turned in response to the question in Rick's voice. His brother stood in front of the bedroom closet. One of its double doors was open.

Rick beckoned him over. "Look at what Saint Christopher's Home for Children is providing in the way of closet fresheners."

Mike went to stand beside his brother and saw the only thing that could have brought a smile to his lips after Slugger's unthinking remark—a woman. She was standing in the corner of the closet, one hand wrapped around the hanging rod, looking like some pomander sent from heaven. Chin-length red hair lay in fluffy tangles around a startled face. Wide eyes of a color he could define only as khaki looked back at him.

"This is private property," Carol said. Then realizing that speaking from the corner of a closet probably diminished her dignity somewhat, she stepped forward.

"You're right," Mike replied, folding his arms. He was more thickly built than the other man, more athletic in appearance. "You must explain what you're doing in my closet."

Carol let her suspicion show. "Yours?"

Mike nodded. "I've rented this retreat cabin for two months."

"Saint Christopher's stopped offering retreats months ago."

"That's true, but I have a little pull here." He smiled down at her. "Mother Margaret is my sister."

The dark features, the height, the mien of self-possession were characteristic of the director of Saint Christopher's. With a breath of relief, she dropped her suspicions and offered her hand. "I apologize. I'm Carol Shaw."

A large, warm hand engulfed hers. "Mike Rafferty. My brother, Rick. About your being in my closet..."

"We were playing hide-and-seek," she explained, not realizing until the words were out of her mouth how silly they sounded. "The children and I," Carol continued. "I'm a dorm mother. Since these cabins are empty, we run in and out of them all the time. We won't anymore, of course," she amended hastily.

Then, with the suddenness of a coastal storm, they were surrounded by children.

"Where have you been? You didn't come and find me! Who are these guys?"

Mike counted five little faces clustering around the young woman. Three children were jumping up and down, and the other two were pulling on her. Personally, he'd rather face the crowd at Yankee Stadium during the World Series.

Then one of the children, a boy of ten or eleven, called his name. "Mike Rafferty!" He said it with an edge of awe, his eyes big and brown as he came to stand in front of Mike.

"And you're...?" Mike offered his hand.

The boy looked at it for a minute, then put his own hand into Mike's, a smile lighting his face. "Frank Kaminski. I live here." Two dark blond eyebrows met in concern over a freckled nose. "How's the arm?"

Mike looked back at the boy for a minute, then smiled. He'd come here to try to put all that behind himself, but it wasn't going to happen today. "I've got a few pins in it," he replied, flexing the arm in question. "But at least I've still got it."

Frank nodded sympathetically. "Tough break. You'd have broken the record next season. A .353 batting average last year, 52 homers, 131 ribbies and American League MVP. God!" he said, forgetting all Mother Margaret's entreaties that he switch to "gosh." "And I shook his hand. I can't believe it."

"I'm going to be here for a while," Mike said. "We'll have to get together sometime and talk base-ball."

"Mike? Rick?" From the direction of the cabin's small living room came the sound of Mother Margaret's voice.

Rick stuck his head around the corner of the room and called, "In here, Meg!"

Mother Margaret, ruddy-faced and tall in her dark habit and veil, hurried into the bedroom to be wrapped in Rick's bear hug and lifted off the floor. She was passed on to Mike, who hugged her, then kissed her soundly.

Mother Margaret reached for Carol, pulling her closer. "Mike and Rick—Carol Shaw, the best dorm mother at Saint Christopher's. Carol, these are my brothers, Mike and Rick, the bane of my childhood."

Turning his attention to Carol, Mike grinned. "Actually, we already met. She was hiding in my closet."

Mother Margaret's eyebrows rose. "You were?"

"It's easily explained," Rick said helpfully. "She and the children were playing hide-and-seek. Actually, now that I've seen her, I think I'll stay a couple of months and rest with Mike."

Mike shook his head. "Not a chance." Then he smiled wickedly. "You get to ride home with Slug."

As Rick groaned, the man in question appeared in the doorway. "Hey!" he shouted. "I could use some help out here!"

Frank stared as if transfixed. "Slugger Lund! Oh, my God!" Belatedly remembering Mother Mar-

garet's presence, he covered his mouth with both hands.

But her only admonition was a look of mild reproach.

"I could help," Frank volunteered hopefully.

"Well, come on." Slugger put an arm on the boy's shoulders and looked disdainfully at Mike and Rick. "You'll probably be worth two of each of them, anyway."

"I'll help, too." Nicky followed them from the room, trailed by the girls.

Turning to follow her five young charges, Carol was stopped by Mother Margaret. "The children will be all right with my brothers." Then she drew Carol out with her into the windy dusk.

"HIS ENTIRE LIFE has fallen apart." Mother Margaret walked around her large office in the building that housed the school, gymnasium and administrative center of the home. "An automobile accident a few months ago almost took Mike's arm. What it did succeed in taking was his career. At the peak of one of the most successful careers in recent baseball history, he was told that he can never play again. The pins in his arm just can't take that kind of strain."

Mother Margaret perched on the edge of her desk. "He's only been out of the hospital a week, but he's been so plagued by news reporters that he needed a place to lie low for a while. As if having his career fall apart wasn't bad enough, a woman who was very important to him chose to leave him while he was in

the hospital. I'm not sure which blow hurt him most. Carol...' She raised bright dark eyes and sighed. "I know you have enough problems of your own, but I thought perhaps you could help me keep an eye on him."

Carol's instinctive reaction was that keeping life running smoothly for the five children in her care already kept her busy every spare moment. And being moved away from Saint Christopher's early next year was going to be hard on them. But it occurred to her that Mike Rafferty probably felt as lost now as her charges did.

Mother Margaret folded her arms and looked at Carol with affection and admiration. "You, more than anyone, know what it's like to sustain a terrible blow and keep going." She paused. "Having you to talk to would do him so much good."

"Mother, I..." Carol began to protest. The fear that had been forcibly folded into the dark recesses of her soul was making a small effort to break free. But she was too good at repressing it. She'd faked composure for so long. She folded her arms, lifted her chin, and the fear subsided. "I'm not a paragon of survival. The children keep me going, otherwise I'd be in a rubber room somewhere. I'm not sure I have a lot to offer, but he's welcome to hang out with us, if he doesn't find us too dull."

Mother Margaret laughed; the sound was distinctly unsaintly. "Your group is anything but dull, Carol."

MIKE WAVED Slugger and Rick off, then stood in the middle of the road until the truck's taillights were out of sight. This was what he wanted, he reminded himself—to get away from the critics and the fans and his well-meaning family to sort out his options for the future. He hadn't expected to feel lonely.

Up the road from his cabin was the dorm that Frank said he and the other children shared with Carol. He liked children, but in large numbers they scared him. They were so quick and so smart, and lately he felt as though he'd lost control over everything. They made him feel as though he couldn't keep up with them—as though he were getting old. In any other profession that would be a laughable thought at thirty-three. But in baseball it was a fact. Still, he'd have had a few good years left.

Hell. He turned back to the cabin, reminding himself that he'd resolved not to become morose.

"Mike?"

Frank emerged from the shadows into the dim light. He carried a plain white bowl heaped with something covered in plastic.

"All right!" Mike said as the aroma of popcorn wafted to his nose. "Thanks, Frank."

"Carol sent me. She's standing on the porch, watching me. We always have popcorn after homework."

Mike nodded. "Thanks for running this over."

"Sure. Well..." Frank hesitated, then started back toward the dorm. "See ya tomorrow."

"Right." Mike waved in the direction of the porch and Carol waved back.

He tossed a kernel of popcorn into his mouth as he went into the cabin. There was something about popcorn, he noted with surprise, that alleviated loneliness. Thoughtfulness from a pretty lady didn't hurt, either.

COLD POPCORN for breakfast didn't dispel loneliness as well as hot popcorn at night, Mike thought as he made his way along a narrow trail. The wind moving through the pines made a loud, mournful noise. He could hear the crash of the surf, though he couldn't see Cape Delancey's lighthouse yet.

"Morning!" a breathless voice called.

He watched her jog closer and closer, her legs in their gray sweats well coordinated and steady. She stopped, leaning forward with her hands on her knees. "Thank you for sending the popcorn over last night."

"You're welcome. The kids thought we should do something to welcome our new neighbor." He looked a little wan, Carol thought. He was such a large man—legs long, shoulders broad—that one presumed an underlying vitality. But looking into his face in the light of day, she could see a slight pallor and a faint sensitivity in his eyes. She wedged bright pink fingers under the elastic cuff of her jacket sleeve.

He surprised himself, as well as her, by pulling off his lined leather gloves and handing them over. "Please," he said. "Put these on. If you go jogging in this kind of weather, you should wear gloves."

Carol slipped them on, feeling the warmth from his hands as her fingers burrowed inside the soft, thick lining. "Frank lost his, so I gave him mine," she explained. "I guess a good glove is something a ball player would never be without."

He glanced down at her and smiled as they followed the narrow path. "I won't have to worry about that anymore."

"Mother Margaret told me you had an accident," she admitted cautiously.

"I was on my way home from the airport and came bumper to bumper with a pickup that had strayed onto my side of the road," he explained. "The lane wasn't big enough for both of us."

Carol stopped in her tracks. In an instant another image flashed through her mind—seat belts holding lifeless bodies in a lump of torn metal, ambulances whining, horrified bystanders.

"Carol?" Mike put an arm around her, frightened by her sudden pallor and sincerely afraid she might faint.

She smiled at him, dealing firmly with the negative emotions that tried every day to wear her down.

"I'm fine," she assured him. Taking a deep breath of air, she changed the subject, as she wandered over to a guardrail and looked out over the ocean. "I love it here. The air is so clean. For thousands of miles it hasn't touched anything but ocean."

Mike leaned his elbows on the railing beside her. "I'm so used to full dugouts and crowds in the tens of thousands that I find being this remote a little hard to get used to."

"If you get lonely," Carol suggested with a wry note in her voice, "all you have to do is join us in the cafeteria or on the playground. You'll get enough noise and activity to make Yankee Stadium seem like the Arctic."

Mike frowned. "Aren't all the kids leaving next week?"

"All but mine." Carol looked out at the gray ocean, her eyes unfocused, seeing something else. "The powers that be thought it best to make the move now, so the children can spend Christmas in foster homes where they'll be treated specially, individually. But we don't have formal releases signed on my kids, and Mother Margaret wants to send them off ready for eventual adoption."

"Is it just coincidence that all the children lacking releases are in your dorm?"

She turned to face him, smiling. "No, I was hired to care for these particular children. Mother Margaret could see this coming and put them together in a dorm, so they'd at least have each other when the other kids left." She kicked a rock in her path with enough force to make it ricochet off the mountainside and fall over the other edge. It was a long moment before they heard the splash. "I wish I could take them all away to some magic island, where they could have all the things other kids have and be guaranteed that they'll never have to move again."

"Permanence and security are

important to everyone."

Carol tore off her hat with an agitated gesture, running her fingers through her hair. "There's no such thing as permanence and security," she said. "But nobody should have to learn that until he's grown."

Those unusual eyes rose to meet his, wide, vulnerable, beautiful. Then they fell and she pulled off his gloves. When she looked up at him again, she smiled, but he knew the gesture concealed something from him. "Thanks for the use of your gloves. I have to run back to get Candy."

He watched her run up the trail, disappearing into the narrowing arch of trees. It occurred to him that his baseball career might be over, but life still had a challenge or two to offer him.

"LOOK INTO my eyes."

Carol looked up from the fragrant, succulent stew Sister Celestine had made. His eyes had tiny flecks of gold in them, like the path of some faraway galaxy.

"Do I look like an elf to you?"

She gave Mike's handsome face a studious perusal. "Not unless you've had your ears bobbed. Why?"

"Meg has assigned me to you," he explained, blowing upon a spoonful of stew. "I'm to help you gather and put up fir and cedar boughs for the Christmas party. Sounds like elf work to me." With a dramatic wince, he raised his arm. "And I have this weak arm."

She laughed. "Please. All you and your weak arm have to do is offer

moral support...and help me keep five children within the sound of my voice in the woods."

"We could tie them to trees until we need them."

Carol shook her head. "Not an acceptable solution."

"That's odd," he said in surprise. "I distinctly remember Meg doing that to Rick and me when we were kids."

Carol laughed again. "I'm sure you must have made her desperate. Actually, you'll love being with children. Before Christmas they get beside themselves with excitement. Their mood becomes infectious. You end up having more fun than you ever thought possible."

"I'm supposed to be resting," he

reminded teasingly.

"Plenty of time for that when you get old."

Days ago he'd felt over the hill, thrown away. Tonight he felt curiously alive, content to let the days pass, to do his elfish duties—and to get to know this woman.

Mike sipped his coffee. "Did you work with children before you came here?" he asked. That was just the right tone, he thought. Interest

without prying concern.

Then she looked up at him and he saw that he wasn't fooling anyone. Her dusty-gold gaze swept his face, making it clear that she answered because she chose to. "Only my own."

So she had children. Before taking time to think, he asked, "Are they with their father?"

He realized in surprise that eyes could scream. The pain in them was

so naked, so strong, that it seemed to have a sound that rang over and over again in his ears. He couldn't remember ever regretting anything so much in his life as having asked that thoughtless question.

"Yes," she replied finally. She pushed her plate away, straightening her back. "They were killed last December in a car accident on their way to the airport to pick up my father." Her swallow was audible. "Dad had come from Denver to spend Christmas with us."

"God, Carol..." Mike reached across the table to cover her free hand with his two.

"Jon, my husband, was a selfemployed carpenter. He'd given himself the afternoon off." Her eyes were dry and unfocused, her voice frighteningly detached. "Gale and Becky were out of school for the holiday break. They had pale blond hair like their father. They were so excited that their grandfather was coming."

He held fast to her. "I'm so sorry. I...I..." Not knowing what else to do, he poured more coffee into her cup and placed it near her free hand.

She remained so still, so dry-eyed, that he knew her telling him had only increased the pain, not eased it. Her eyes were quieter now, but he thought uneasily that she had only stored the grief.

"Actually, I'm fine," she said, her voice sounding normal, if a little weary. "I've learned to keep going. Having the kids to fuss over and laugh with has brought me further than I ever thought I'd be able to go. And your sister's been wonderful to

me...." She gave him a smile that helped him relax a little. "So don't expect me to sympathize with you because she tied you to a tree." Realizing that she still held his hand, she drew hers away. "Everyone at Saint Chris's knows about my family and that I prefer not to talk about it. Being comforted always makes me fall apart, and I've worked too hard at becoming functional again to let that happen."

Mike let a small silence fall, then said carefully, "Maybe they think talking about it would help you."

"It doesn't," she said stubbornly. "It only makes it hurt more."

He had a theory or two about that kind of grief having to hurt for a while before it could heal, but now didn't seem the time to mention them.

"Is IT REALLY necessary that they be up there?" Carol looked up into the branches of a tall fir. Frank sat astride one thick bough, sawing off some of the smaller offshoots around him. Nicky offered encouragement from a branch nearby.

Mike tossed an armload of branches into the back of the battered truck, then came to stand beside her, following her gaze. "Of course not," he replied easily. "We could have easily trimmed from the bottom branches, but Frank and Nicky wouldn't have had half as much fun." He transferred his gaze to her face, his eyes warm and teasing. "I thought you knew all about kids."

"I never said that," she denied. "I also have no knowledge of orthope-

dics, so please don't let them fall. The girls and I are going to cut some holly across the road."

"Sissy," he accused.

"Elf!" she countered, laughing when he gave her a look of disgust.

As he turned around to check on the boys, she watched him. He walked back to the tree with the unconscious grace of a professional athlete. For a moment she had a picture of him running for the catch, surrounded by a cheering stadium. She felt a stab of pain for him and what he had lost.

Mike turned, and finding her still behind him, mistook the direction of her concern. "I'll watch them," he promised. "Go on."

Calling the girls to follow her, Carol crossed the road and set to work. Giving Dorcas a second set of clippers, she worked until the box was half-full, then handed the clippers to Kathy.

Candy jumped up and down, her breath puffing in the cold air. "Can't

I cut some?"

"You're not big enough, Candy," Kathy said, tossing a sprig into the box. "Maybe next year."

Dorcas stopped to frown at Kathy. "We won't be here next year."

Kathy frowned back. "I forgot. Do you still think we oughta run away?"

"Girls," Carol said reasonably. "Running away wouldn't be a good solution."

"Why not?" Dorcas demanded.

"Do you have any idea how much we'd worry? The sisters and I and the other kids? And you'd be all alone." Dorcas sighed and turned a look on Carol that ripped a little further at a heart already in shreds. "My mother knows I'm here, but if I move, how will she find me?"

Kathy, who believed everything she was told, answered with conviction. "If she's a millionaire, like you say, she'll be able to hire a detective, even ten of them. They'll find you."

Dorcas prodded a holly leaf with the tip of her clippers, her chin quivering dangerously. "Yeah."

"If she tries to find you," Carol said quickly, controlling her voice with difficulty, "she'll know what state agency to go to for help. They have your records on a computer and can bring your file up in a second." Dorcas turned to Carol with a hope clearly so frail that Carol was tempted to encourage her with lies, to promise her whatever she wanted to hear. But the child had been disappointed too many times to be set up again. "If she doesn't come, your foster family will take good care of you, Dorie, and if you try to like them, you'll be happy.''

Dorcas nodded, only half con-

vinced.

"And you won't have any trouble with Santa," Kathy added.

Dorcas squinted at Carol as the sun emerged from behind the clouds. "Do you think Santa knows what we're thinking?"

Carol shrugged. "I don't know. But I know if you were to run away, even if he wanted to bring you presents, he wouldn't know where to take them."

Kathy looked startled. "Doesn't he have a computer?"

"Who?" Mike appeared behind Carol's shoulder, and she took the coward's way out.

"Santa," she replied. "Do you

think Santa has a computer?"

"Oh, everybody ha—" he began, but Carol gave him the most fractional but insistent shake of her head.

"Everybody has a computer but Santa," he said, nimbly shifting gears. "Much too cold in the North Pole. The circuits don't work."

Carol began to relax when Frank, who had followed Mike over, asked, "You mean Santa doesn't have electric heat, or even an oil furnace?"

"Santa has only a fireplace," Mike replied. When Frank would have challenged him further, he said, his eyes speaking to the boy, "Trust me, Frank."

To Frank, distrusting Mike Rafferty was unthinkable. He nodded

and let the matter drop.

As the children moved off, Carol

breathed a sigh of relief and grinned up at Mike. "Thanks. You're the best light Yue guer met."

best liar I've ever met."

He nodded humbly. "It's a gift."
"I'll tell Mother Margaret what an exemplary elf you've been."

"I HAVE something for you," Meg told Mike.

Mike looked up. "Why does that make me suspicious?"

"Because your veneer of Christianity is so thin," she replied, giving him a look of disapproval as she passed him a steaming mug of some brown-speckled milky substance. "I

made this especially for you, Mike," she said.

"Eggnog!" he said, taking it from her. The scents of nutmeg and cream assailed his nostrils. He took a sip and his eyes widened. "Alcoholic eggnog!"

Meg was beside him, pulling him toward a stool against the back wall. "The Christian Brothers made the brandy. It's practically blessed. Sit down"

Mike took another sip, relishing the taste of the holiday brew as it began to warm his stomach. His suspicions resurfaced, however, as Meg paced back and forth in front of him.

"Will you be Santa Claus tomorrow?"

His feeling of well-being was dispelled. "No."

Meg folded her arms over her apron. "I'm desperate," she said impenitently. "Most of the children are leaving here day after tomorrow, and their feelings range from nervousness to terror. God will help them adjust to new surroundings, I firmly believe that. But I know that a good send-off from Santa will help them believe that, even in their shaky world, someone still loves them."

"Damn it, Meg . . ."

"Please?"

The vulnerability in her face was his undoing. Mike took a sip of eggnog and appeared to consider. "Is this eggnog a one-shot deal?"

He saw the twinkle in her eyes. "I can probably negotiate a few more for you at decent intervals."

He toasted her with his mug. "Ho, ho," he said.

MIKE LOOKED at the diminishing line of children and saw that Nicky was next in line, with the rest of Carol's kids lined up behind him. Nicky's eyes were wide.

Mike put out a hand. "I'd like to hear what you want, Nicky."

Holding Carol's hand, Nicky gave Santa a long, uncertain look and hid behind Carol. "You tell him what you want first, Carol," he bargained, "then I'll go."

Carol looked at Santa. Behind that tangle of whiskers, she thought she could see a most un-Santa-like wickedness in his eyes as he drew her onto his knee.

Santa inclined his head. "You've kept the dorm clean and made time for your jogging?"

A gasp came from the bottom of the steps. "He knows Carol jogs!" Candy was openmouthed.

"Of course." Kathy patted her little sister's shoulder. "Santa knows everything. God tells him."

"My elves," Santa continued, "tell me that you've been very kind to your neighbor and send him popcorn at night when he's all alone." Another gasp came from the bottom of the stairs. "Because you've been kind, you can have anything you want."

"I...don't..."

"There must be something you want," Santa prodded.

"A purse," ever-practical Dorcas prompted.

"That's it," Carol managed. "A purse. Mine is always full of the children's things and lives a very hard life." Carol found Mike's eyes in the thicket of hair and eyebrows.

Standing, she reached down the steps for Nicky.

Nicky allowed Santa to lift him onto his knee. He leaned back against Santa's arm and got down to business. "I'd like a tricycle, my own television, a Nintendo Power Pad..."

MIKE SAT in a deep, lumpy chair, the Santa suit folded into a box on the floor beside him, the scratchy, atrociously designed mustache and beard in his hands. Even two flights up, he could hear the high-pitched children's voices at the party in the gymnasium. He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, hoping he wasn't going to burst into tears. When he had learned his career was over, he'd felt angry, cheated, depressed—but he didn't remember ever feeling as truly helpless as he did at this moment.

One by one, trusting little children had sat in his arms and confided their dreams. He remembered Carol's children particularly because he knew them better. In one way or another, they'd all been betrayed, and yet Dorcas had asked for a present to give Carol, Kathy's thoughts had been for her sister, and Frank, living with his own pain, sagely understood them all. The injustice of it was building a fire in his middle.

Then he remembered the children's faces glowing, their eyes shining. He had helped them believe.

THE CHILDREN were leaving. Meg and Sister Claire hugged three children before putting them into a car that would take them to a foster home and a new life. As the car drove off, another pulled up, and the routine began again. Still in pajamas and bathrobes, the children in Carol's dorm knelt on the sofa and peered out the window at what they could see of the driveway. They were silent.

Carol came out of the kitchen, a cup of coffee in her hands. Her eyes brightened when she saw Mike. Hooking her arm into his, she pulled him into the kitchen. "I thought I'd take the kids into town. I know they have to accept the fact that they're leaving eventually, too, but spending all day watching the other kids leave doesn't seem healthy to me." Her small smile had an element of pleading. "Want to help me ride herd on them?"

He looked over at the lineup of children, looking smaller and more vulnerable in their night wear, and nodded. "Sure."

IT AMAZED Mike that a full complement of ball players, rowdy with postgame excitement and too many beers, made less noise than five young children.

The small restaurant smelled deliciously of mesquite-broiled hamburgers and greasy french fries. Carol inhaled deeply of the aroma as she and Mike and the children settled into chairs at a round table in the middle of the terrazzo floor.

Mike watched Carol give the waitress their order, easily remembering who wanted what on their burger, and cutting the fries down to five orders rather than seven. The children had trekked to the washrooms.

"Candy and Nicky will never finish theirs," she explained to Mike. Then she smiled. "You're going to need three days in bed after today. Although you do display a natural aptitude for dealing with children."

He denied that with a laugh. "I haven't done anything but chase them down in time to avert disaster."

She matched his laugh. "That's parenting in a nutshell. They like you, and you make them feel comfortable about that by letting them know you like them back. That's a gift some people don't have."

"Actually," he said, leaning back as the waitress distributed Cokes around the table, "I have to admit that I'm experienced. I have two little nieces. I don't see them often enough, but I'm crazy about them."

The girls arrived back giggling and smelling of hand lotion. Frank and Nicky returned to the table a mercifully few minutes later.

ONE LONELY french fry remained on the plate sometime later when Candy scrambled out of her chair. Eyes closing sleepily, full belly protruding under her new T-shirt, she climbed into Mike's lap and cuddled against his shoulder. Carol watched him hold her close and say something quietly to her as she burrowed into his neck.

Carol glanced at Kathy, wondering if she objected to her little sister sharing her affection with Mike. But instead of the jealousy she expected, she encountered a wistfulness in Kathy's dark eyes. Carol's heart ached for Kathy, and she suddenly found herself longing for her own father, who lived a vast thousand miles away.

"Well, hot damn, if it isn't Mike Rafferty!" A paunchy older man in jeans and a red parka stopped at their table. "I'm Milton Boardman and this is my wife, Gert." A small gray-haired woman behind him nodded and smiled. "I been a fan of yours since you were a rookie."

Boardman patted Frank on the shoulder and looked around the table at Carol and the children. Obviously concluding they were Mike's wife and children, he laughed heartily. "Looks like you put together your own team good enough to win the pennant."

The children were beaming at him, Mike noted, apparently delighted at being mistaken for his. For the moment it seemed a harmless fantasy, and he made no effort to correct the man. "And to take the series in four," he said.

From Mrs. Boardman's purse came a camera. "May I?" she asked quietly. "With Milty?"

Boardman quickly added a chair between Dorcas and Nicky, put an arm around each of them and grinned at his wife, who ordered, "Now, smile everybody." There was a moment's stillness, a click, and a loud commotion as Milton gave each of the children a five-dollar bill, then said goodbye.

Ecstatic with their windfall, all the children began to talk at once as Mike and Carol stared at each other like the stunned survivors of a hurricane. "I guess that's what happens," she said finally, "when you keep company with a star."

Mike laughed softly. "Wasn't he great? I won't miss the national attention as much as I'll miss being appreciated by guys like Milton."

"Aw, I appreciate ya." Standing, Frank put an arm around Mike's shoulders. Then he held up his five-dollar bill and looked imploringly at Carol. "Now can we go shopping for fun stuff?"

THE CHILDREN talked incessantly all the way home, excited by the unusual outing, by Mike's company, and by the financial boon that meeting Milton Boardman had brought them. But the conversation stopped when Carol drove past the empty school yard. The large stone statue of Saint Christopher in the yard protected no one; his children, except for the five in the station wagon, were gone.

Kathy began to cry. Carol parked the car, then opened the back doors for the children. Mike lifted Kathy into his arms and she clung to him, scrawny legs in jeans wrapped around his waist. He started down the trail to the dorm. Carol lifted out Candy, who was sobbing, and shepherded the rest of the children together. His mouth set in a grim line, Frank took Nicky's hand and

glanced at Dorcas, who stood still, blue eyes ready to spill tears. He pinched the sleeve of her jacket between his thumb and forefinger, pulling her along. "Come on, Dorie."

In the dorm, Carol flipped on all the lights to counteract the swiftly falling darkness. "Take off your jackets," she ordered briskly, filling the teakettle with water. "We're going to talk about this."

"I don't want to talk about it," Frank said, giving the scarf around his neck a desultory yank. "I don't

think any of us do."

Approval was muttered from the sofa near the window, where the other children had settled. Mike, still holding Kathy, though she was quiet now, sat on one of its arms.

"I've moved four times," Dorcas said, leaning back against the sofa cushions, half in and half out of her jacket. "It wasn't ever easy."

Carol nodded. "I know, Dorie. I'm not trying to tell you that moving away from Saint Christopher's is going to be easy for you." She smiled at Dorcas and patted her knee. "We all know it'll be hard, but adjusting to your new surroundings will be your responsibility. Each of us has the job to get along in this world, and you're not excused from it just because you're a little kid, or because things have made it harder for you than for other people."

"Like not having parents," Frank

said.

"Or," Dorcas interjected with simple compassion, "having your children die, like yours did." Frank, caring and protective of Carol, leaned forward to glower at Dorcas. "Dorky, you're so stupid!"

Gently Carol pushed Frank back. She was pale, but her voice was steady. "No, she's not stupid. She knows that what I felt when they died relates to what I'm talking about." She put a hand on Dorcas's knees and drew her closer. "I wanted to crawl under the bed and never come out. And then Father Cunningham told me about your dorm needing someone to stay with all of you. If I had stayed under the bed instead of coming to be with you, I'd have missed so much fun. Instead of letting that be the end of the world for me, I started again with you."

"But now that's going to be over,

too," Frank said pointedly.

"Being together will be over, but not the willingness to go on. Because you guys are so brave, you helped me be brave. The only difference is that instead of being brave together, we'll have to be brave separately."

"That'll be a lot harder," Dorcas

predicted.

"I know," Carol admitted. "That's what I was talking about. When you get to your new families, if you try to be helpful and not grumpy, they'll think you're pretty great. They'll be as good to you as you are to them. But you have to do your share to make that happen. That's your responsibility." When everyone nodded in agreement, Carol hugged Nicky, then put him on his feet. "Okay, then let's wash our hands and go to bed."

As the children's voices dissolved into sounds of water splashing in the bathrooms, Mike pulled her after him onto the porch.

Her eyes were brilliant and panicky. He put both hands at her back and pulled her toward him. "Relax," he said gently. "Lean on me for a minute. I can't believe that little talk didn't cost you something."

She expelled a long, ragged sigh and inclined her body against his. It was a little like leaning on a wall, she thought—a warm, responsive wall—and at that moment the support was a welcome relief. His arms tightened around her as a cold wind swept past them.

"MEG ASKED me to deliver this."

Carol took the letter from Mike, nodding as though she'd been expecting it. "My travel arrangements," she said, unable to meet his gaze. "Thank you."

"Sure," he said, folding his arms.

"Where are you going?"

"I have a secretarial position at the American embassy in Paris. I'm scheduled to arrive there February 15."

She felt something for him, he knew she did, but she was looking at him with a ruthless sort of nonchalance. He took the chair next to hers. "Why so far away?"

She shrugged, absently running a finger along the edge of the table. "I thought it would be good for me. It'll be something new."

"I'm something new," he said, smiling at his own blatant selfpromotion. Then his expression sobered and he added softly, "And what's old and familiar in your life, you'll carry with you, no matter how far away you go."

Carol gave him a look intended to keep him at a distance, but he saw her underlying pain and looked back at her steadily. "You won't freeze me out, Carol, so stop trying. Maybe it's time you settled up with the past."

Her indignation fell away and her expression was suddenly all pain. After a moment, she shook her head and smiled grimly. "The past refuses to settle with me."

Carol stood and went to the refrigerator, her hands quick, her movements catlike as she poured milk into a juice glass. "If you have such a clear perception of everything," she said without turning to look at him, "then you should be planning your own future instead of worrying about mine."

"That's what I'm trying to do. But my future seems to be moving to Paris," he said, pushing himself

away from the table.

She shook her head with an air of finality. "No," she said, repeating the word a second time. "No." She was saying no to everything.

He walked to the counter where she stood, stopping within a hairsbreadth of her. Her eyes grew wide, startled and warily defensive. A fear close to panic rose in her when he placed a hand on the counter on either side of her.

"Yes," Mike said simply, not touching her. Emphatically, firmly, he repeated, "Yes." Then he turned away and was gone.

Carol stood alone in the kitchen, a hand to her chest as she gasped for breath. Images cluttered her mind, faces she'd turned away from for a year came into sharp focus—Becky with her angel face, Gale with the devil in her eyes, Jon with his loving smile. She put her hands over her eyes, silently screaming, No! No! But the memory of Mike's voice penetrated even the depths of her grief. "Yes," he had said. "Yes."

THE GROUND was a thick carpet of white, and the trees wore the snow like long capes of some exotic pelt. It was dark, and the children chattered excitedly about Christmas being a scant four days away.

Carol tucked in an already sleeping Candy, then went to tug Kathy into bed. "I bet Santa did this for

us," Kathy said.

"Nature did it," Dorcas offered sensibly from the far corner of the room.

Not to be discouraged, Kathy folded her arms over the blankets and said gravely, "I think Santa did it—to kind of make up for not being able to give us everything we asked for."

Dorcas leaned on one elbow. "He hasn't even come yet. How do you know we won't get what we asked for?"

Kathy said quietly, "I never do. Do you?"

Dorcas hesitated a moment, then lay back. "No."

"So Santa sent snow instead."

Carol bent down to kiss Kathy and Dorcas good-night, holding each close for an extra moment.

In the hallway, Carol met Mike coming out of the boys' room. "Everything all right in there?"

Mike nodded as they walked together into the living room. "It depends on how you feel about Frank's plan to motorize the toboggan for tomorrow."

Carol smiled. "I swear his brain never rests." In the middle of the room she turned to him, her expression suddenly sober. "Do you remember what all the children asked for when they told Santa what they wanted for Christmas?"

"Everything down to Candy's real cow. Why?"

Carol rummaged through her purse and scanned the balance in her checkbook. "Because they're convinced they won't get it. Kathy thinks that Santa sent snow so they wouldn't be as disappointed." She frowned. Her funds would barely stretch to cover the small things she had planned to purchase for them tomorrow afternoon.

Mike put his hands into his jacket pockets. "Well, they're wrong. The kids are going to get what they asked for. You can help me pick it all out."

Carol stared at him. "Maybe it's not the right thing to do. They have many more Christmases ahead of them. When it never happens again, they'll be disappointed."

"Or they'll remember how great it

was that it happened once."

Carol put her arms around his neck and held him, her heart filled with affection for this man who had come to love her dorm children as much as she did. She tightened her grip on him for a moment, then

stepped back.

Mike controlled the urge to pull her back. "Tomorrow," he said, backing toward the door, "we're going shopping."

BUT THE following day Carol had more serious concerns than shopping. She and her children marched into the administration office, with Mike right behind them.

"The toilet won't flush," she explained to Mother Margaret. "And all the faucets are dry. I think the

pipes have frozen."

Mother Margaret sighed. "I know. It appears—" Mother Margaret cleared her throat "—the pipes have broken all over town." She frowned into her coffee cup, a slight shade over her usually confident demeanor. "Because it's so close to Christmas, several of the plumber's staff are on vacation. He won't be able to get to us for four or five days."

A communal gasp rose from the group. Nicky sidled up to Carol. "When I have to go again, I won't be able to hold it for five days," he

whispered worriedly.

Carol patted his shoulder, assuring him that he wouldn't have to. Visions of every resident of Saint Chris's moving into Pointer's Beach's one gas station crossed her mind.

Mike stood and reached for the telephone. "Get everyone packed, Meg," he said decisively, putting a hand over the mouthpiece. "We're moving to my place."

"We can't..." Mother Margaret began to protest.

"We can't stay here," he said, then into the receiver, "Hutton, it's Mike. We're going to have house-guests for a few days. Three nuns, five children, and a woman." Then with a small frown he asked, "Hutt, are you okay?" He listened a moment, then answered patiently, "No, you heard me. Nuns. We'll arrive in three or four hours."

The children ran off toward the dorm, squealing delightedly.

MIKE'S HOME was a sanctuary of English country coziness in the hills overlooking the Willamette River and the city of Portland that sprawled along both banks. Carol hadn't expected the warm comfort of big-flower-patterned furniture, pedestaled ferns, filmy curtains and French doors that led out to a covered patio.

A short, spare man in a dark suit appeared in the doorway. Carol watched him look over the quiet group of nuns and children. His eyes widened slightly, and she got the distinct impression that he'd just quelled an urge to run in the other direction. Then his eyes fell on Mike, and he seemed to pull himself together. He moved into the room with quiet, almost martial grace.

"All the rooms are ready. Cots are set up for the girls in the downstairs guest room and for the boys in the den. The sisters can share the room on the corner upstairs, and the young lady can have the smaller one next to it," Hutton informed him

with a raise of his eyebrows. "We've cornered the market on cots in this county."

Mike grinned. "Very good. Okay, kids. Go on and find your rooms." As the children dispersed with a whoop of excitement, Carol hurried to follow them, but Mike pulled her back. "I'm going to need you," he said. "As I recall, we had a date to go shopping."

Mike forced himself to forget that sometime after the holidays he was going to lose her. For one afternoon he had her to himself. Pennants were won after carefully plotted campaigns, but games were won day by day, and so, he was just beginning to realize, was life.

"KATHY WAS specific about a doll with diapers, a diaper bag and a bottle."

"There." Carol pointed to a small one just above her head.

"No, there." On the top shelf was one the size of a healthy infant. "It has designer diapers. Kathy will appreciate that."

Carol found him as difficult to deal with over the rest of the purchases. All the musical bears had to be tested to find the right tune for Candy, something cheerful but not lively enough to keep her awake.

"Come on." Mike waved for the sales clerk and put a bill on the counter. "We still have to find something for Dorcas."

"What about Frank?" Carol asked.

"I've already taken care of that. Who's going to explain to Candy that she can't have a real cow?" Mike and Carol stood in the middle of the toy store hand in hand. It was three minutes to nine, and the clerks eyed them malevolently.

"We've got to make a decision,"

Carol said.

"Dorcas didn't ask for anything for herself." Mike looked around despairingly. "All she wanted was a necklace, so she could give it to you."

Carol pulled him over to a display. Then she saw a doll as tall as a two-year-old, with a pudgy face, a big smile and blue eyes that closed when you tipped her backward. She pulled it down and studied it. "I think she's never had her own doll." She looked up at him, her eyes full of tears. She blinked back. "I have a feeling she'll love it."

He didn't take a moment to think. If he did, he'd probably decide what he was about to do wasn't right for her, him, or whatever might become of them. So he simply wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

HUTTON'S GRIP on composure was more desperate than it had been when Mike and Carol had left to go shopping.

"Kids okay?" they asked simultaneously when he confronted them in the living room. As though on cue, loud laughter issued from the basement.

"They're watching movies."

"The sisters?" Carol asked in concern.

"When I brought chips down, they were playing pool. There's been a message from your family, sir." Mike turned away from the cupboard from which he was pulling cups. He frowned at Hutton. "What

happened?"

"They're coming." He made the announcement heavily, squaring his shoulders with apparent trepidation at the very thought. "They're coming here. All of them. Your mother and other sister and her family." Hutton's voice rose. "There's not another cot to be had in all of Western Oregon!"

Stiff-backed, Hutton disappeared

down the steps.

Mike dropped his head onto his arms with a groan and Carol sat down beside him, laughing. She was finding it impossible to be unhappy around him, finding it difficult to remember the day that had been with her like a dark burden for so long.

MOTHER MARGARET pushed the loud group of children out the door. "We'll see you in time for dinner. We've got Sister Cel, and Hutton's coming skating, too. That means you two are in charge of dinner."

"No problem," Mike assured her. Mother Margaret snickered. "And

probably no dinner."

Mike pushed her the last inch out

the door and closed it.

Carol smiled at him as he joined his hands behind her head and bent down to give her a kiss. His hands wandered over her back and hips, his mouth eliciting a little groan from her.

Carol felt his strong back muscles under her hands and pulled back while she still had the clarity of mind to do so. "We're supposed to be wrapping presents," she said, drawing a ragged breath.

He sighed. "Come on. The loot's down this way. I locked the sitting room so the kids wouldn't get nosy."

A large library table was littered with rolls of paper, ribbon, tape, scissors and gift tags. On the floor all around the table were the gifts they had purchased.

The pile of unwrapped presents was going down. Carol was carefully creasing the ends of the wrap on the box that held Kathy's doll. On her face was a preoccupied frown. "Have you got the pink ribbon?"

"Me?" he asked innocently. She looked up to see that Mike had tied a length of it around his head, the tails of a big bow dangling past his ears. "Want to unwrap me for Christmas?"

She leaned toward him, her chin propped on one hand. "You look ridiculous."

He mimicked her action, leaning toward her until their faces were an inch apart. "Want to chuck all this and make love with me?"

Carol realized with a start what an appealing suggestion that was. His warmth had woven itself inside her, melting the cold memories, lighting all the dark places she had closed off a year ago. She felt ready to live again—and fell back against her chair as that knowledge struck home. She was in love with Mike Rafferty.

"What?" Mike asked in concern. He watched her in fascination. "What?" he asked again, concern diminishing, fascination growing. "I wanted you to have something besides a purse for Christmas."

Carol stared at him, speechless. All the feelings of a moment ago rose to constrict her throat and fill her eyes. "How do you always manage to do that?" she demanded at last in a whisper. "Find the thing I most need," she explained in awe. "Whether it's a smile, or help with a chore, or something for the kids..." She swallowed. "And give it to me."

He saw it then in the depths of her eyes, a pleasure so profound that it hurt. "I'd like to make that my life's work."

Truly sure of herself for the first time in a year, she drew a deep breath. "I love you, Michael Rafferty," she said, looking into his eyes.

Mike's hands came out slowly, in direct counterpoint to the quick burst of emotion in her eyes. He ran them gently up her arms, almost afraid to touch her and burst this fragile dream. "I love you, Carol."

The words seemed to form around her like a silken embrace. She let her forehead fall against his chest as the past gave her up with an almost physical release.

DINNER WAS a quick affair; the children were anxious to see the tree lighted for the first time. Mike turned out the house lights, and evervone gathered around as he connected the cord that led to the tree. The "Oh!" that rose from everyone was one heartfelt, single expression of satisfaction.

"I can't see!" Candy complained, trapped in a throng of taller bodies.

Mike reached down to lift her onto his shoulders.

"Wow!" she gasped.

Sister Cel began to sing in a clear alto, and the others joined in. They sang carol after carol, finally sinking to the carpet to sing even more. Over the children's heads, Carol caught Mike's eye, her heart full of love and happiness.

"This is the best Christmas,"

Kathy said feelingly.

"Yeah," Candy agreed.

Even Dorcas's agreement was hearty. "Yeah!"

"THEY'RE HERE!" Kathy reported from the window as a van pulled into the driveway.

Mike grabbed Carol's hand. "Come on. You'll love my sister."

Mike was halfway out the door, already waving at Lorraine, when Carol's sudden stop brought him up short. The pain of her fingernails digging into his hand made him turn back to her. "Carol, what-"

Her eyes were huge and horrified, and her face had gone deathly white. Her lips were parted and pulled back into a grimace as she looked beyond him to the driveway. He followed her gaze, wondering what had brought about such a reaction. Then he saw them. His nieces Erika and Patsy, three and five, were dressed in bright red jumpers over frilly white blouses, their pale blond hair in braids. Her little girls had been three and five with fine blond hair, and they'd been

dressed to pick up their grandfather at the airport last Christmas. They must have looked much as Erika and Patsy did now.

Carol's first reaction at the sight of the girls had been a burst of joy. A miracle had happened. It was Christmas. Somehow her babies were back. She had taken a step toward them before the grimness of the intervening year rose up to strike her yet again. Those were not her little girls. Her babies were gone. Forever, Carol, a voice inside her seemed to say. Forever. When will you ever understand that?

Suddenly she understood as she had never understood in the last year. It settled on her with the weight of an anvil. Jon was gone. Her babies were dead. And then it was as though a door opened, admitting every pain, every vicious fear, every cold and paralyzing memory she'd fought so long and hard to hold back.

She yanked herself away from Mike and ran for the stairs with a small scream in her throat. It seemed to amplify as she ran, growing louder and louder as she topped the stairs, raced down the hallway, and gained the door to her room. By now the scream had grown high and interminable, and she turned frantically to find its source.

"Carol!" Strong hands shook her. She tried to pull away from him but he held her firmly. "They're crying for me!" she screamed at him. "Let me go!"

"Carol, they're gone!" he shouted back. He shook her again, then, as she stopped to try to focus on him, he said more quietly, "Your children are gone."

She fell against him in a paroxysm of weeping. Mike enveloped her in his arms, trying to wrap himself around her like a shield.

"I should have died with them!" she cried as he pulled her with him onto the edge of the bed.

"No," he said firmly. "What would the kids in your dorm have done without you? God kept you behind for a reason. You're doing what he wanted you to do."

He rocked her back and forth, holding tight. She closed her eyes, shook her head over the pain of the memories. "My last words to them were, 'Don't get your dresses dirty." She pounded both fists against his chest. "How could I have done that?"

"Carol," he chided gently, "every mother in the world since Eve sends her children off with the same admonition. Don't let that torture you."

She stared into a corner of the room, her eyes still unfocused. "I wasn't there when they needed me."

"There was nothing you could have done about the accident. They're in good hands now. They don't need you anymore. But your dorm kids do."

The dorm kids. Out of the waves of pain came images of the little faces that had kept her alive for the past year, like some emotional life-support system. With that thought she remembered that they'd be leaving soon, and the pain that was already unbearable grew still more intense.

"You wanted Christmas to be so special for them," Mike reminded her

Yes, she had. They had done so much for her; she had wanted to do that for them. But at that moment she felt drained to the point of exhaustion, and the very thought of moving out of the room was abhorrent. She had to do it. She leaned away from Mike and drew a shaky breath. "I'd better wash my face and go downstairs."

"Not yet." Mike stood, drawing the bedspread over her. "You need a little time to rest, a little time to take care of yourself instead of everybody else."

"But I..." She tried to sit up, but he pushed her back.

"You can't move into the future until you put the past away, and to do that, you've got to let it hurt."

"The pain is stronger than I am."

Mike bent down to kiss her cheek. "I've seen you in action. Nothing is stronger than you are. Now sleep."

A SMALL KNOCK sounded on the door, and Dorcas walked in, coming shyly across the room to stand at the side of the bed, her ponytails askew.

"Hi," she said, putting a hand over Carol's atop the blanket. The gesture was very adult, very understanding. "Are you going to come down?"

"Yes," Carol replied, hoping she'd be able to look at Lorraine's little girls without making another scene. "I was just thinking about changing my clothes." "Hutton and Sister Cel made a turkey and all that stuff that goes with it."

"Mmm."

Dorcas sat on the edge of the bed, a small quiver in her bottom lip. "Frank and me and the other kids made a deal not to talk about this as long as we're at Mike's, 'cause it makes us sad, but I guess it's okay to talk to you about it." She leaned toward Carol earnestly. "Pretty soon we're all going to be going to different places, and I... I wanted to say something, okay?"

Carol nodded. "Of course,

Dorie."

"You used to make believe about your little girls, didn't you, like I used to make believe about my mom and all the stuff I said we had?"

Emotion rose to flood the emptiness, and Carol had to swallow carefully. "Yes, a little."

"Well, it's better if you don't," Dorcas said. "You have to get ready to live with new people—new foster families and new friends. Well, you won't have a foster family, but there's Mike. Like you told us, it's your responsibility to fit in."

Carol clutched at Dorcas's hand. "That's true."

She tossed the bedspread aside and swung her feet to the floor, finding herself smiling with a smile she didn't know she had.

CAROL AND DORCAS reached the bottom stair. "I think all the ladies are in the kitchen," Dorcas said quietly.

Mike looked up from the table, his eyes going quickly over her in an obvious attempt to assess her emotional state. Certain that she was under control, she smiled at him. He smiled back, preparing to rise.

But a young woman emerged from the kitchen and hooked her arm through Carol's. "I'm Lorraine. The youngest of the Raffertys." She put special emphasis on the adjective.

The kitchen was a cloud of steam, a collection of tantalizing smells, a stronghold of women in white aprons. A plump woman emerged from the chatting, laughing group of nuns and children, wiping her hands on the skirt of her apron.

"Carol, this is my mother Rita Rafferty. Mom, this is Carol."

The woman took Carol into a maternal embrace. Then she held her at arm's length and asked gently, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Carol replied, insisting to herself that she would be. "I apologize for—"

Rita hugged her again, cutting off the apology. "Nonsense. Here." She handed her a potato masher and pulled her toward a bowl of steaming potatoes. Rita wandered around the kitchen like a sergeant, assigning jobs and supervising their execution.

As Carol worked, Lorraine's little girl, Patsy, climbed onto a stool beside her. "I like lots of butter," she said.

Carol stared at her for a moment, air trapped in her lungs. She waited for the pain to overtake her. It came, but more gently than it ever had before, just the bittersweet nudge of something beautiful that hadn't lasted long enough.

Lorraine put an arm around her daughter's waist and prepared to pull her off the stool, her expression anxious. "Darling, Carol is very busy. Why don't you...?"

Carol put out a hand to stop the other woman, meeting her eyes, then smiled. "She's not in my way. Let her stay."

THE CHILDREN were up by five on Christmas morning. When Frank opened his package and discovered a regulation bat and ball signed by each of the New York Yankees, his joy was indescribable. He threw his arms around Mike, who sat on the floor several feet away. "This is so great!" he said over and over again. "Whatever happens, I'll always have these, and they're so great. You're so great."

While Nicky was riding his trike around the dining room table, Mike reached far under the tree for a small, slim package. He handed it to Dorcas. "Here's a little package with your name on it."

Her eyes widened. The tag read To Carol from Dorcas. A small smile of satisfaction lighted her face. She handed the package to Carol. "This is *from* me, for Carol."

"Oh, sorry," Mike said innocently. "I must have misread the tag."

When Carol pulled the tiny teardrop of crystal on its gold chain out of the box, Dorcas's mouth opened on a little "Oh" of pleasure.

"Dorie," Carol said, clasping the chain around her neck, "this is the loveliest pendant I've ever owned. Thank you so much." She gave the

girl a hug, holding her an extra moment. "Now let's see what you've got."

Returning her attention to a large package, Dorie shook her head. "But I...I didn't ask for anything!"

"Well, Santa sent it," Mike said,

indicating the tag.

Carol guessed by the way Dorcas pulled slowly on the ribbon, carefully separating the tape from the paper, that opening presents wasn't something she had done often. She stared at the doll that was now visible through the plastic film.

Carol feared she'd made a mistake. She'd just exchanged a worried look with Mike, when Dorcas reached inside the box and brought the beautiful, pink-cheeked doll to her shoulder, crushing her in her arms and rocking her with a happiness so profound that Carol had to draw a deep breath to retain her composure.

Suddenly, a hand holding a ball rested on Carol's shoulder, and a hand holding a bat rested on Mike's, drawing their two heads together. "If you two don't quit sniffling," Frank whispered, "you're going to blow Santa's cover."

The day had a dreamlike quality. Carol had never hoped in her wildest dreams to be able to give the kids this kind of Christmas. Not only was it filled with the toys and gifts that lent the season its special excitement, but they were both giving and receiving the love that made it magic.

"MIKE, telephone!"

Rick, flipping pancakes, handed the phone over his head to Mike, who stood beside him, frying bacon. Carol and Frank carried plates back and forth from the stove to the table and the horde of hungry children.

"What?" Mike demanded into the receiver, putting a hand over his other ear to block out the noise. Mike swung the phone cord over Rick's head and sank onto a stool, as though what he was hearing sapped his energy.

After a long, one-sided conversation, Mike replied, "Sure. Tell them I'm interested and I'll call them back by the end of the week." He cradled the phone on the wall, a look of amazement on his face. He turned slowly to Rick and Carol. "They want me to manage the Portland Pilots."

"Wow!" Frank was beside Mike in an instant. "Are you going to do it?"

"Yeah..." Mike was still unfocused. "Maybe. But I want to think about it before I give them an answer."

Carol leaned toward Rick and whispered, "We're not talking about airplane pilots, are we?"

He put an arm around her shoulders. "No. We're talking about the number two team in the American League. Mike could make them number one. Bacon's burning."

Frank ran into the dining room to spread the news. In a moment the kitchen was full of family. They were all excited for Mike. Carol noted a slight withdrawal on Mike's part, a little holding back of the all-out delight he must be feeling inside.

AFTER Mike's family had left, the contingent from Saint Christopher's stood in the middle of the silent living room, faces quiet, expressions uncertain. This had been a very special time in their disrupted lives.

The holiday came to an abrupt end that afternoon; the Pointer's Beach plumber called to report the pipes repaired and functioning at Saint Christopher's. Mother Margaret's announcement was received gloomily by everyone.

Carol walked into the kitchen to find Mike making coffee.

"Want something to go with that?" she asked chattily. "I think there are some croiss—"

"I just want to talk," Mike said firmly, putting the cups on the table. He pulled out a chair for her. "Please."

Carol took the chair and faced him as he sat. "You want to know if I'm still going to Paris."

He took a sip of coffee as though he needed it. "Yes."

She sighed. "I think I have to."

He accepted her reply with a calm that surprised her. "You don't think our love changes anything?"

"I thought it had changed me," she said, pain rising in her. "Then I saw your little nieces and I reacted like my true self—like the woman I will always be—Becky and Gale's mother. Jon's wife."

"Carol," he said quietly, "you're using that as an excuse. Give me a chance to love you."

Her throat was clogged with emotion, her brain a maze of unclear thought and fiendish doubt. "I... I'm hollow inside, Mike. You need a whole woman... without a trouble-some past, so that you can start fresh."

"Carol." His quiet voice was scolding. "I can't start fresh—I don't want to. Won't you trust me and move ahead with me?"

God, I want to, Carol thought. His dark gaze was even, steady—as firm a promise as any woman could hope for. But she wasn't any woman. She'd lost everything once and was coming to the grim realization that she simply hadn't the courage to risk it again. Accepting cowardice, she lowered her eyes. "I can't."

MIKE FROWNED, studying the New York return address on the letter Meg had given him. Inside the envelope was another, smaller envelope with a vaguely familiar name in the upper left-hand corner. Milton Boardman. Suddenly he remembered the tourist at the restaurant in Pointer's Beach. Smiling reflectively, he opened the envelope and removed a note written on lined paper.

Was a real kick to meet you, Rafferty. None of my friends believed me till I showed them the picture. Thought you'd like a copy. So I took guts in hand and called George Steinbrenner, who promised to send this on. If you're ever in Los Angeles, please look us up.

Best, Milton Boardman

Tucked into the note was the photograph of himself, Carol and the children. There was a certain rightness to the photograph that cut Mike more deeply than any pain he'd ever experienced before.

They'd been back at Saint Christopher's for weeks and Carol was still planning on leaving him for

Paris,

CAROL GLANCED at her watch, having finished her shopping in Pointer's Beach. Mike and the children were ten minutes late in picking her up.

Drawing in a deep gulp of biting early-February air, Carol looked up at the grim, gray sky. A grimness to match the sky settled around her; in four short days, the special life she'd lived at Saint Christopher's Home for Children—and the special people who'd become part of that life—would be gone.

KERMIT the mouse in one hand, Nicky's hand in the other, Mike led the children hurriedly to the car. "Everybody in and buckle up," he ordered, his voice a little sharp after the twenty-minute search he'd had for Kermit in the ice-cream parlor. Once behind the wheel, he carefully handed the mouse to Nicky, who sat in the middle. "Please keep hold of him."

Nicky rubbed Kermit's head with a small fingertip. "I'm sorry."

"I know. It's okay." Mike concentrated on speaking quietly while looking over his shoulder to check seat belts. "But we're half an hour late picking up Carol, so let's all be on our best behavior, so we can get there quickly."

They were within blocks of their destination when Nicky lost his hold on Kermit.

"Kermit!" Nicky shouted, un-

buckling his seat belt.

"What?" In fairly busy midafternoon traffic, Mike slowed, holding Nicky back in his seat with one arm, while controlling the car with the other.

"I'll get him." Frank slipped to the floor of the car. "He's under the gas pedal! I've almost got him!"

Still holding Nicky in place, Mike glanced down at Frank, then up again—just in time to see a battered blue pickup pull away from the curb into the steady stream of traffic. Hoping Frank had said that Kermit was under the gas pedal, and not the brake to which he was firmly applying his foot, Mike leaned sideways to hold both boys in place. The station wagon jammed into the back of the pickup with a teeth-jarring crash.

CAROL HAD imagined the sound of metal crashing into metal for a year; it was the sound track of her every nightmare. Even before she saw the blue pickup a block away lurch forward from the impact, her heart began to thud, and her mouth went dry. When she saw that the pickup had been struck by the station wagon

from Saint Christopher's, her heart plummeted to her feet, and for one awful moment her blood froze. No, she prayed, pleading. Not Mike and my dorm kids. Please!

She ran the block in Olympic time, pushing aside people who were beginning to gather around the wagon, including the well-meaning man who was trying to open the driver's side door. She tore it open, pausing for a moment at the sight of Mike, leaning back against the headrest, his eyes closed. Blood poured from a gash over his left eye.

"He hit his head on the steering wheel," Dorcas said, her eyes wide as she leaned over the front seat. "He took his belt off to get Frank up...."

It occurred to Carol to wonder what Frank had been doing on the floor, but she was too busy rooting for a handkerchief to press against the gash to think any more of it. A quick glance into the front and back and the high level of squirming and explaining told her that the children were fine.

"Ah!" Mike grabbed her wrist, trying to sit up. "The kids..." he said, trying to push her away.

"They're fine." She pushed against him and found him momentarily too disoriented to struggle. "Just lie still."

He winced as she applied pressure. "Did I...squash Kermit?"

"He's fine, Mike! See?" Nicky held the struggling mouse under Mike's nose before Carol could stop him. Mike opened one eye and gave the boy a tiny smile. "Good. I'm having him on a sandwich tomorrow."

WITHIN FIFTEEN minutes of Carol's call to Saint Christopher's, Meg arrived at the hospital to take the children home.

"I'll leave you the truck," Meg told Carol as she walked them to the hospital's double glass doors. "We'll go back in the station wagon. It's pretty battered, but it seems to be drivable."

She nodded. "Yes, of course. Mike's going to be fine, too."

An hour later Carol and Mike started off from the hospital with a grinding of gears. They bounced on in silence for several minutes, then her voice penetrated the quiet. "Do you still want to marry me?" she asked.

For a moment Mike said nothing—he doubted that he even drew breath.

"Do you still want to marry me?" she asked a second time, without removing her eyes from the road.

"Well, I don't know," he finally replied. "I thought you had nothing to offer me."

She sighed, appearing to concentrate on the stretch of road picked out by their headlights. "So did I. Until I saw the accident and..." Her voice broke. "I thought I'd lost you...and the kids. Just like the last time." She pulled off the road just before the climb into the hills, but it was a moment before she could turn away from the wheel to look at him. When she did, her eyes were large and moist and filled with pain.

Forgetting his own pain, Mike moved to the middle of the seat and took her into his arms. "I'm sorry I was responsible for your reliving that," he said.

"No." She surprised him by pushing him away, her unsteady lips firming. "The fear and the pain I felt weren't for Jon and my girls. They were for you and my dorm kids." She put her arms around his neck and looked into his eyes, her own even gaze underlining the importance of what she was telling him. "I loved my family so much, Mike, but I think I've finally assimilated the love and put the grief away. I love you. I want to marry you."

"Carol. God." He crushed her to him with a sense of disbelief. "Say that again. Right in my ear."

"I love you," she repeated gently against his temple. "I want to marry you."

He pulled away, his sore head forgotten. "When?"

She looked a little reluctant. "Do you think four days is too fast? I'd like the kids to give me away before... before they go."

He nodded, still staring at her. A shaky hand went up to stroke her cheekbone. "What about Paris?"

She shrugged with a negligence that was completely convincing. "Maybe we can visit it one day. I really don't care."

He pulled her close, feeling life beginning to flow in his veins. "I'll make you happy. I promise."

"You've already done that. Just love me."

"Always. Forever."

"Mike?" She drew back, a question half-formed on her lips and spilling out of her eyes.

He waited. When she tried several times and finally sighed without asking it, he held her loosely in his arms. "You can ask me anything," he said gently. "Just say it."

She looked at him, paused, then shook her head, turning to start the truck. "I'll ask you later. Tonight I just want to savor the fact that you love me and I love you."

THE MORNING of their wedding came, and she was still unable to ask the question. She just couldn't ask anything so outrageous of Mike, when he was just finding his feet again after a major disruption in his life, when the future looked promising but uncertain. Perhaps later, when there would be more time. She sighed, tugging at the peplum of her blue silk suit.

From the back bedroom wafted the sound of quiet conversation, as Sister Celestine helped the girls dress for the ceremony. Carol noticed the absence of giggles, the subdued tenor of their talking. All the children had been delighted by the announcement of the wedding, but tomorrow they would all go their separate ways, and that heartache pervaded everything. Carol closed her eyes, thought for a moment, prayed, then ran for the front door.

In the living room of his cabin, Mike slipped into the tux jacket. In the next room Frank helped the boys dress. There was a tension underlying Frank's voice that he recognized as pain. And at the heart of his almost overwhelming happiness, there was an answering pain. Carol's love made him feel like Superman, but he couldn't expect her to want to... That was stupid. She'd been through so much. She'd need time.

Mike expelled a breath and moved to the kitchen. Putting a hand on the refrigerator door, his attention was diverted by the picture Milton Boardman had sent of himself and the seven of them around the table at the restaurant. Candy was asleep in Mike's lap, and the other kids were all leaning in toward the center, grinning from ear to ear, happy, pretending that they were a family. Suddenly its rightness was too overpowering. He snatched the photo and ran to the front door.

MIKE AND Carol met in the middle of the leaf-strewn path that ran between her dorm and his cabin. They went into each other's arms in a mixture of laughter and surprise.

"I wanted to find you," she said, resting the palms of her hands on his chest. "To... to ask you that question I never finished the other day." Then she looked puzzled. "But what are you doing out here?"

"I was coming to find you," he replied easily. "I have a question, too. But you first."

She nodded, eager to ask him before she lost her nerve. "Would you...could we...I mean, are you..." She closed her eyes and breathed out a gust of air that rippled the brim of her hat. She grabbed his hand. "Mike, what I want to say—" Her hand connected with something unfamiliar, and she pulled her eyes away from his to extract the photo from his hand. She looked down into the broad smiles of her dorm kids. She, Carol, looked for the first time in a year as though she belonged somewhere, and Mike, relaxed and proprietary, was clearly caring for all of them.

She looked up at him again, her khaki eyes brimming with love. "What was your question?" she asked.

Life fell into place around him, and he smiled. "I was wondering," he began, pulling her closer, looking at the emotion churning in her eyes, "if you saw any reason why that picture shouldn't become reality. Now. Today."

"Not one." She pulled his face down and kissed him long and deeply. Then she pulled back with a small frown. "But now? Today? The ceremony's in about twenty minutes, and bureaucratic red tape..."

He turned her toward the dorm and headed for the administration building. "Go back inside. I'm going to see Meg and have her get things rolling. I love you," he shouted, sprinting up the walk.

"I love you, too!" she shouted back, thinking that even a bureaucratic government couldn't stand against such power.

As Carol repeated her vows, the past finally at peace within her, she felt more complete, more real, than she ever had before. She thanked

God for the miracle of Mike and prayed that he would compound his miracle by making the children hers, too.

"I pronounce you man and wife," Father Cunningham said, smiling as he blessed them. "You may kiss the bride."

Mike looked down at Carol and saw everything he'd ever wanted in the world in her eyes.

Then the double doors of the chapel opened and Mother Margaret stood in the opening. Mike caught Carol's fingers in his as he waited for Meg to reach them.

"Everyone seems to think it's a good idea," she said quietly, smiling. "There are, however, procedures that have to be followed, regarding investigation of your characters and backgrounds, which, in the interest of the children, can't be waived."

Mike felt Carol lean against him. "How long?" she asked, disappointment strong in her voice.

"A few weeks," Mother Margaret replied. "Meanwhile," she went on, a broad smile suddenly taking over her face, "you have temporary custody for as long as it takes."

Carol screamed and Mike shouted; they pounced to include Mother Margaret in their hug.

Then everyone became aware of the children standing behind them in the middle of the aisle, watching in complete bewilderment. Mike opened his mouth to speak, saw all the watchful little faces, and suddenly realized he didn't know what to say. He smiled at Carol. "You're so good at this."

"It was your idea," she reminded

Mike stepped in. "We're all going home to Portland together. We're going to adopt you."

Dorcas leaned forward. "You're kidding, right?" she asked gravely.

Carol put an arm around her. "We're not kidding, Dorie. We're going to be a family, all of us."

Dorcas looked from Carol to Mike as though still trying to assimilate the news. "And live where we lived at Christmas?"

"Yes."

"But..." She shook her head. "That wasn't real. That was like one of the dreams I used to make up. It's like—" her voice faded "—the stuff other kids have."

"It was real," Carol assured her, wrapping both arms around her. "And you'll never have to move again."

Mike cuddled Nicky, Kathy and Candy. But Frank remained in place, pale, his eyes wearing a stunned look. Mike put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Frank swallowed and looked up at him. "I'm going to be Mike Raffer-

ty's son?"

The awe with which he spoke the words made Mike understand, more than anything else had, the awe-some responsibility he had undertaken—and the rewards that awaited him if he could just do it right. He took the boy into his arms and held him, then pulled away and smiled down at him. "I will be Frank Kaminski Rafferty's father."

Frank smiled back. "Wow!" he said.

They walked down the aisle, an army of seven, arms entwined, everyone talking at once. At the door of the church, Carol tugged Mike to a stop. He looked down into her face to see love, happiness.

Carol stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "I swear to you," she whispered fiercely, "that I will devote my life to giving you everything."

"God," Mike said, crushing her close, thinking how much his life had changed in two months. "You already have."





CELESTE HAMILTON The Diamond's Sparkle



Liz Patterson's wise aunt Eugenia spots just the man for her attorney niece in dashing P.R. entrepreneur Nathan Hollister. Though Liz is hard to convince for a time, circumstances—and compromises—finally have her believing in love.



A pretty bunch of piranha, aren't we?"

The quiet words made Liz Patterson turn from her perusal of the crowded hotel ballroom to the one person who could so aptly label a Nashville society bash.

"Aunt Eugenia!" Liz exclaimed in delight. "I didn't think you were

coming."

The elderly woman laughed, submitting to a hug from her niece. "Not come? When have I ever missed an opportunity to show off, even just to these social predators?" The black sequins on her dress flashed.

Liz stepped back to admire the effect of her great-aunt's attire. From her white hair to the tips of her black slippers, Eugenia was the picture of style. Her figure was still trim enough, her features still delicate. Not bad for eighty, Liz approved. "You look spectacular."

"Thank you, my dear." The blue eyes swept over Liz's emerald satin suit. "Didn't you wear that to my

Christmas tea last year?".

"Yes, but"

"I would have thought you'd be more festive tonight." Eugenia nodded at the colorfully attired crowd. "Granted, most of these people are dull as mud, but I have spotted a couple of attractive men."

"I didn't come here looking for men, Aunt Eugenia. I'm with Jim

Levinson."

"Horse feathers!" Eugenia cried. "I hoped you might be out with a real man."

"You wouldn't say that about Jim

if you really knew him—"

"I know a wimp when I see one, thank you. And so do the good people of Tennessee. That's why he lost the election."

"He lost because his opponent

spread vicious rumors."

"Nonsense. No one believed Jim Levinson ever seduced anyone. He's too wishy-washy for that, and the country has enough of those in Congress already. I'll never understand why you spent so much time working on his campaign."

"Aunt Eugenia, please," Liz cau-

tioned.

"Only a wimp would leave a woman as lovely as you standing

alone at a party."

"He didn't. He had some business to discuss with someone, and I was talking with Maggie and Paul—"

"Paul?" Eugenia snorted. "Why do you and Maggie O'Grady pick the least exciting men in the city to date?"

Liz jumped to her best friend's defense. "Paul is a very successful investment banker—"

"I've met him, and I imagine even his underwear drawer is arranged alphabetically," Eugenia observed. "What you need is someone who will take your breath away. No, there was a man here earlier who reminded me of someone..." Eugenia's gaze swept the room. She frowned deeply, until a nearby cluster of people shifted, and she smiled in triumph. "There," she whispered. "Now, that is what I call a man."

Praying for invisibility, Liz glanced in the direction her aunt indicated. She expected anything but the pair of hazel eyes gazing back at her from barely ten feet away.

She recognized the eyes. The tawny hair. The winged, dark eyebrows. The broad, confident set of the tuxedoed shoulders. She smothered a curse. Of all the people in the room.

A smile quirked the corners of Nathan Hollister's mouth as the woman in green turned away. This woman was worth more than a glance. Thick chestnut hair curled past her shoulders. Emerald satin clung to her slender figure. Blue eyes. Tiny, straight nose. Red lips. Nathan had caught it all before she looked away.

The elderly woman beside her smiled and nodded at Nathan, acting as if they were good friends. Did he know her? He couldn't come up with a name.

"Excuse me. Have we met?"

"I don't believe so." Her voice was clear and strong. "But you do seem familiar. Your name?"

"Nathan Hollister."

"Any relation to Rupert Hollister of Memphis?"

"He's my grandfather," Nathan said proudly.

"Of course. You look just as Rupert did when he and I were much

younger." She winked and held out her hands. "I'm Eugenia Davis, an old friend of your grandfather's. How nice to meet you."

Nathan laughed in delight at her openness. Gently squeezing her frail fingers, he filled her in on his grandfather's latest exploits. From the way she talked, he got the impression she had been more than his grandfather's "friend." He could understand why. Eugenia must have been gorgeous in her prime.

"And this my grandniece, Liz Patterson," she said, nodding at the young woman beside her, who turned reluctantly from the crowd.

He had time to appreciate the similarity in looks between the two women before Liz's blue-eyed gaze flashed up to meet his.

"You should have asked me earlier, Aunt Eugenia," she said. "I could have told you Mr. Hollister's name."

"Do we know each other?" Nathan doubted he would have forgotten someone as lovely as Liz.

Liz continued, "I believe it was Mr. Hollister's public relations firm that directed the campaign of our new Congressman, Hugo Mantooth."

"Oh, dear," Eugenia murmured, then hastened to explain. "Liz was a staunch supporter of Mr. Mantooth's opponent."

"As a matter of fact, I'm here with Jim Levinson tonight," Liz said, finally directing a remark to Nathan. "And since Mr. Hollister's firm started the rumors about Jim, I'm not feeling very charitable toward him." Turning on her heel but smiling, she started to leave.

"Now wait a minute." A firm hand closed on Liz's elbow before she could take more than a step. Then, dropping her elbow, Nathan stepped back. "I didn't start any rumors."

"Oh, come now-"

"It was a preposterous rumor which I for one never believed. I can't imagine why anyone did."

Liz tossed her head. "Well, evidently someone believed it. Or else your client wouldn't have squeaked in."

Nathan's laughter was derisive. "In experienced political circles, an eight-point margin of victory is not considered a *squeak*."

A flush followed the fury that streaked up Liz's body. "Are you saying I don't know what I'm talking about, Mr. Hollister?"

"Maybe.

Eugenia hastened to explain. "Nathan, Liz is quite experienced in politics. She's a lawyer, and she's active on behalf of many social issues, like housing the homeless, feeding the poor and saving the sharks—"

"The whales," Liz corrected tightly.

"Noble causes all," Nathan commented.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course."

"Then it's a pity your client didn't address any of those issues in his

campaign."

Nathan frowned. "I wasn't aware that saving the whales was of major importance here in the state. Are there really whales in the Tennessee River?" he asked, all wide-eyed innocence as he turned to Eugenia.

This time Eugenia laughed. It was lusty, straight-from-the-heart laughter that Liz had never been able to resist. There was no point in not joining in. Nathan followed suit.

Eugenia hailed a waiter and procured glasses of champagne for them all. "Now isn't this much more pleasant than arguing over some silly campaign that's over and done with?"

"Much nicer," Nathan agreed, admiring Liz. Laughter did even more for her peachy, glowing skin than anger.

Liz couldn't resist one last jab. "I still don't care for your sleazy, mud-

slinging campaign tactics."

"Point well taken." He paused to sip his drink. "But I want you to know that I really respect the passion of your commitment."

There was no mistaking what word he had emphasized. Just as there was no mistaking the bold, appraising look in his hazel eyes. Or were they green? Liz wondered as she gazed up into them.

Eugenia coughed then, making a choking sound. Concerned, Liz turned to her and was surprised when Nathan's expression seemed equally worried.

"Are you all right?" he murmured.

"Oh, certainly," Eugenia replied crossly. "It's just a drawback to getting older. Crowded, smoky rooms no longer agree with me."

Nathan tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow. "Then you should go." He looked at Liz. "I'd be pleased if you'd both join me for a drink somewhere else."

Liz wanted to go. But she didn't know why. Hollister wasn't the sort of man who usually interested her. She doubted he had a social conscience. And if all she'd heard about him was true, he'd betray his mother to get ahead. Yet there was something distinctly appealing about him. Perhaps it was the rumpled, littleboy tumble of his hair. Not blond but not brown, it rioted over his head like a lion's mane, longer than current styles dictated and immensely touchable.

Touchable? She was losing her mind. She wasn't going anywhere with this man. Even in the company of her aunt.

"Well," Eugenia prompted. "Are

you coming with us, Liz?"

"You've forgotten that I already have an escort for the evening," Liz returned sweetly.

Nathan's grin was closer to a smirk. "Where is the good Mr. Levinson, anyway?"

"He had business to attend to,"

Liz returned.

"Then I'm certain none of it is true."

Liz blinked. "What's not true?"

"The rumors about Levinson. If he was half the man the rumors claimed, he never would have left someone like you all alone."

His words were so close to what Eugenia had said earlier that Liz gasped. Her aunt chortled merrily as Nathan led her through the crowd.

But over the noise, the word wimp floated with unmistakable clarity back to Liz.

WEAK MORNING sunshine spilled through the window and across Eugenia's desk. She glanced up from the letter she was writing and looked outside. December. Another year almost gone.

Her sigh was not unhappy. Having lived her life exactly as she pleased, Eugenia was packing no regrets to carry through the rest of her days. And she was too busy to worry much about getting older. She still had her health. She had her charities, her family and friends, and a wealth of memories to keep her

company.

Eugenia counted the last twenty years as the very best of her life. After all, she had lived on three continents. She had made good on her youthful pledge to see and do it all whatever "it" might be. But when she had traveled enough, she had come home to an old house on a quiet street where Liz's parents had welcomed her and allowed her to share their daughter. Liz and her friends had filled Eugenia's life with love. For that she was profoundly grateful.

Liz and Maggie and Cassandra. The children Eugenia had never found time to have. Her fond gaze fell on a framed snapshot of the girls taken nearly twelve years ago, during Liz's high school graduation party. That night Eugenia had given. them her favorite pieces of jewelry. A pearl necklace for Maggie. A ruby pin for fiery Cassandra. And to Liz, as solid as she was brilliant, Eugenia gave her most treasured diamond earrings.

The gifts had been valuable, but to Eugenia the gesture had been purely symbolic. She wanted each of "her" girls to remember they had something unique and infinitely precious to offer the world. And now Liz was a successful attorney. Maggie ran her own decorating firm. And if Cassandra wasn't exactly turning the New York stage on its ear, she was busy and happy. The only thing that disappointed Eugenia was that all three of her girls were entering their thirties—alone.

It wasn't that she gave credence to any claptrap about a woman being incomplete without a man. Yet she believed that life was richer and fuller when shared. Though she had never married, she had known the warmth of sharing. And those memories insulated her from loneliness. She wanted those sorts of memories for her girls. Especially for Liz.

UNLIKE THE crowded courtrooms of television dramas, the room Nathan slipped into was half empty. He took a seat midway to the front, the perfect vantage point from which to study Liz.

She looked every inch a professional, her slim shoulders straight, her chestnut hair coiled at the nape of her neck. A jaunty red handkerchief was tucked into the pocket of her gray suit. He nodded in approval. Red meant confidence.

Evidently the trial was nearing its end. While one of the other lawyers rose to present his closing remarks, Nathan relaxed and watched Liz.

For almost a week he had been trying to see her. Lunch and dinner invitations had been left via messages to her office and her home answering machine. Polite refusals had been extended by the efficient voice of Liz's secretary, but Nathan wasn't accustomed to being refused. Yesterday he had sent flowers and a note.

Why was he so fascinated? It was more than Liz's social connections. It was also more than the challenge she presented. He had other challenges on his mind right now—such as getting his new business successfully off the ground in Nashville. No, he had not one logical reason for his unrelenting pursuit of Liz Patterson.

Abruptly his attention snapped back to the courtroom. Liz had taken the floor and was before the jury, presenting her closing argument. She would have them believe her client had played no role in a convenience store holdup last summer. The woman had been duped by her boyfriend.

Nathan leaned forward, letting Liz's arguments wind around him. He believed her. More importantly, the jury was eating out of her hand. Damn, but she's good, he thought.

The adrenaline was pumping through Liz. It was always this way when she believed in her client. Turning from the jury, she paused, ready to give her speech its final punch. Then she saw Nathan. And her concentration broke. For a moment she stared at him. He grinned. She spun away from his scrutiny, gathering her composure. The slipup was minuscule, but Liz was fuming inside. Nothing—no one—had rattled her since the early days of her career.

He was waiting for her in the corridor afterward. Leaning against the wall in a tweed jacket and navy slacks, he looked very handsome, a little bored and faintly amused.

"Counselor, that was a brilliant performance," he drawled, falling in step beside her.

"Thank you. What brings you to these hallowed halls of justice any-

way, Mr. Hollister?"

"I got curious about the case that's been keeping us apart."

"Nothing is keeping us apart but me. I believe my secretary—"

"-is getting tired of my calls."

"I'm the one who's getting tired of you," Liz snapped.

"Did you get my flowers?"

"Yes, and"

"My note?" he pressed.

A flush crawled up Liz's neck. Attached to the three ivory roses had been a card which said simply, - "They remind me of your skin."

"Don't you like roses?" he asked, bracing one arm against the wall where they now stood, as he leaned

Liz didn't like being cornered. Her chin lifted as she looked up at him. "Of course I like them, but—"

"Shh." Nathan silenced her by placing his fingers gently against her mouth. To his surprise, there was nothing gentle about the desire that ripped through him.

Strangely unable to move, Liz watched raw emotion replace the usual cool expression on Nathan's face. He leaned closer.

"Let's get out of here," he whis-

Slowly she shook her head. "I can't."

·"Why?"

"Work"

"What about dinner?"

Liz started to say yes. Then she caught herself. Nathan Hollister had her exactly where he wanted her. But this one he would really have to work

She touched the knot in his silk tie and smiled at him. "I'm afraid the answer is still no, Nathan. I just don't want to go out with you," she added.

"You will," he said. Then he was gone, his easy, rolling stride carry-

ing him away from her.

From a phone booth in the lobby, Nathan watched Liz leave the building, noting her smile. So she was wavering. Good. He punched in a number.

"Hello?"

"I think it's time for Plan B," he said, not bothering to identify him-

Eugenia chuckled. "Not as easy as you thought, huh?"

"She's almost ready to crack."

"No prizes for almost, my boy," she replied.

"You're right," Nathan murmured. "What's your plan?"

Spurred by an icy wind, Liz hurried into the house. The entry foyer was warm and smelled of pines. Miniature lights twinkled in the garland on the stairway's curving banister. Soft music and laughter floated from down the hall. As usual for the holidays, Aunt Eugenia had infused the house with festive cheer.

"You're late again, chérie."

Liz smiled at Jeannette, the housekeeper, who looked crisp and neat in her black uniform.

"I'm always late," Liz said, shrugging out of her velvet evening cape.

Jeannette took the wrap. "You work too hard."

Liz ignored that as she turned to adjust her earrings at the mirror by the door. Her face was too pale against the brilliant diamonds and her vivid red taffeta dress. After a surprising two days of deliberation, the jury had returned their verdict at five. Liz had lost.

Her shoulders drooped a little. She had been so sure she would win. Now her client, at nineteen, faced several years in prison and separation from her children. Liz had failed her. What could she have done differently?

A light touch on Liz's arm made her look up to find Jeannette regarding her with concern.

"Everyone is in the middle parlor," the housekeeper said. "You should join them. Go have some fun."

Patting Jeannette's hand, Liz thought that if Aunt Eugenia hadn't decided to throw this party for her charity auction committee, she probably would have spent the evening alone in her apartment, brooding. This was much better, even if she was certain to see Nathan Hollister.

She saw him immediately. At the center of a group of earnest-looking men, he was easily the tallest person present. Their eyes met, and she expected him to join her. Instead he returned to his conversation, and Liz knew a moment's disappointment, followed quickly by irritation.

Eugenia called a greeting, and Liz was soon circulating with wineglass in hand. As usual, Eugenia had assembled an interesting group for her committee. Nashville's old guard mingled comfortably with the inevitable politicians and the reigning king and queen of country music. Liz found her friend Maggie in a corner, discussing a decorating job with a client.

"No shop talk," she scolded them playfully.

Maggie's companion laughed and took herself off to have her drink freshened.

"He's interesting, isn't he?" Maggie murmured.

"Who?" Liz asked.

"Him, of course." Maggie nodded toward Nathan, now sitting beside Eugenia, laughing at whatever she was saying. His laughter was as rich and smooth as warm honey.

Liz cleared her throat. "He's okay, I guess."

"He's been watching you ever since you got here."

"Don't be silly," Liz protested.

Maggie's brown eyes were teasing. "I'm going to talk to him next week about decorating his office."

"How nice."

"Don't you want to know more?"

"No." Liz drained the last of her wine, then left Maggie and crossed to the bar.

She noticed that Nathan immediately went to the opposite side of the room. Their gazes met again, but his slid away. She joined the group he was in, and he excused himself. All right, Liz thought grimly, avoid me, Mr. Hollister.

But at dinner, Nathan's place card was next to Liz's. Thanks, Eugenia, he thought. Her plan was proceeding just as they had discussed.

Liz smiled at him, a trifle too brightly. "Why, Nathan, I haven't even had a chance to say hello."

He held out her chair. "Yes, I've been trying to get to your side all evening." He took his own seat. "Did you win your case?"

The smile disappeared, and Liz's gaze lowered. "No." Before Nathan could react, the gentleman to her

right claimed her attention.

Dinner conversation caught Nathan, too, but he found his gaze coming back again and again to Liz. He wanted to ask her what had happened, but the opening never came. After dinner she disappeared with Maggie, and for Nathan the party lost its spark. Over coffee in the parlor, he tried to concentrate on being charming. The room was full of valuable contacts. He was surprised to realize he didn't care. He would rather be talking to Liz. When Maggie returned without her, he hesitated only a moment before slipping out to look for Liz.

She was in the front room. A Christmas tree stood in the window, its colorful lights brightening the otherwise dim room. Standing beside the tree, Liz looked weary, her

expression pensive.

"Are you making a Christmas wish?" Nathan said, leaning against the doorjamb.

Liz glanced up. She wasn't at all surprised to see him. "As a matter of fact I was making a wish."

He ambled toward her. "What were you wishing for?"

"Wishes don't come true if you share them."

"And wishes don't change the minds of jurors."

Liz glanced at him, wondering how he could have known she was wishing for another chance for her client.

"You were terrific," he continued. "What went wrong?"

"Who knows?" She shrugged and looked away.

"You don't want to talk about it, do you?"

"No."

"I understand. Every time an account slips through my fingers I don't want to discuss it with anyone for days. That's what I like about having my own firm."

Liz lifted an eyebrow. "Pardon me, but I would hardly compare that

to my client's jail sentence."

"Hey, my occupation may be different from yours, but I am allowed to care about it, aren't I?"

He was right. Liz gave him a smile of apology. "I'm sorry. I sometimes get a little intense about my work."

Intense about everything, Nathan corrected silently. He grasped her hand. "Come for a drive with me."

"A drive?"

His grin was almost irresistible. "The party's winding down. Eugenia won't mind."

She wavered, and he took advantage of her hesitation. They had said goodbye to the others, retrieved their coats and were out the door before she could gather another protest. She'd even forgotten her silent vow

never to go anywhere with him, Liz thought as she slid into the passenger seat of his sports car.

Nathan rummaged behind the seats. "Here," he said, handing Liz a heavy woolen blanket. "Put up your hood and wrap this around your legs." With that, he rolled the convertible top back.

It was the wildest ride of her life. They roared through the sedate streets of her childhood and streaked onto the interstate. The lights of the city blurred into neon ribbons. Nathan's radar detector shrieked warning after warning. The frigid wind stung her cheeks. She could taste the cold. It combined with her excitement, and she realized she liked the flavor, though recklessness had never been her style.

She was windblown, frozen, and laughing when the car screeched to a halt at the Opryland Hotel. The parking lot was full of people.

"How about a nice, warm Irish coffee?" Nathan suggested.

Teeth chattering, Liz agreed, and they hurried inside.

If asked why the hotel was so special, most people would say it was the Conservatory. Beneath a canopy of glass, story upon story of hotel rooms looked down upon a huge tropical garden. And for the holidays, it had been transformed into an even more magical place with Christmas lights and music.

"It almost makes you believe in Santa Claus again, doesn't it?" Nathan murmured.

"My thoughts exactly." Liz gazed up at him. "How do you always know what I'm thinking?"

"Because everything going on in that beautiful head shows in your eyes."

His voice was husky and seductive. The sound vibrated through Liz, making her wonder why she had ever thought of resisting him. He could make her laugh. And now he looked as if he was going to kiss her.

The idea of dancing caused Nathan to toss aside his overcoat and sweep Liz into his arms. She looked completely kissable—but if he kissed her now, he couldn't be held responsible for what might happen next. Dancing seemed the only appropriate way to hold her body tightly to his.

So they danced, Nathan twirling Liz easily down poinsettia-decked walkways and across bridges festooned with garlands and lights. They fit together well. Her head to his chin. Her soft breasts against his chest. It was easy to imagine other sultry movements, other velvet sighs. Did Liz guess the direction of his thoughts? Nathan doubted she had to guess, especially when he ended their dance by pressing her to him, dipping her backward with a flourish.

Nathan brought her back to her feet, but their gazes remained locked. Their lips were inches apart. Her laughter died. One hand reached up to touch his hair. His head lowered, his mouth intent on the lips she parted. Then the applause started.

Startled, Liz moved away. The dance she had thought so private had an audience. A crowd of people stood in clusters, beaming at them. Predictably, Nathan bowed to the

crowd, and Liz could only drop a curtsy, too.

The crowd dispersed and, relieved, she followed Nathan into the dark anonymity of Rhett's Saloon. But it wasn't until the waitress placed a second Irish coffee on the table that Liz's senses calmed. Two drinks, she thought. Letting her hair down was getting to be a habit.

Through the crown of whipped topping, she sipped the hot, sweet beverage. "You really know how to take a girl's breath away, Mr. Hollister."

"It's my specialty," he teased, wiping a dollop of cream from the side of her mouth. He licked the froth from his finger, and Liz shivered at the intimacy of the action, remembering the feel of his hard body pressed tight against hers. Dangerous ground, her mind warned.

She cast about for some other topic of conversation. "Maggie said she might be decorating your office."

"Eugenia says she's very good."

"Oh, she is," Liz agreed. "She did my apartment."

"I'd like to see it."

Liz swallowed. He wasn't making small talk easy. "Where did you settle?" she asked.

"In Brentwood."

"There are lots of nice complexes out that way."

He shrugged. "I'm not home much."

"I know what you mean. I'm usually working."

"Maybe you work too much," he murmured. "You should leave some time to laugh, Liz."

"Now you sound just like Aunt

Eugenia."

"She's a smart lady." He smiled. "Someone with a laugh as nice as yours should use it more often."

He took her hand and gave her fingers a slight squeeze, his thumb stroking across her knuckles. "People who work hard need to play hard, too."

"Is that your personal philosophy?"

"What do you think?"

She thought of his reckless abandon behind the wheel of his car and of his all-out pursuit of her. "But you have to slow down sometimes, don't you?" she pressed.

His handsome mouth spread into a smile. His sinfully long lashes swept down over his eyes. "Oh, there are some things that I can take very slow," he whispered, raising her hand to his lips. The lashes came up, revealing a look full of sexy suggestion.

Liz caught her breath. His mouth was so soft, its movement against her skin intoxicating. She knew a moment's sharp regret when he let go of her hand.

Noting her dazed expression, Nathan smiled even wider. She was a tough one, all right, but she was right on the edge of capitulation. He wondered why that knowledge didn't bring the usual surge of triumph.

Shrugging off the slight feeling of unease, he said, "You're dead on your feet. Let's get you home."

Liz was so tired she gave Nathan directions to her apartment instead of going back to Eugenia's for her car. He had put the top up, and she felt warm and very safe, soon drifting into sleep.

Then they were at her apartment door. Her mind hazy from sleep, Liz didn't protest as Nathan came inside. She put up no struggle at all as his arms closed around her and his mouth covered hers.

It was a delicious kiss. Smooth but tingly. Like a sip of good brandy, Liz thought drowsily. Then she wasn't thinking anymore. She was moving in Nathan's arms, pressing herself to him, letting his kiss take her to the edge of arousal. Mere kisses had never done so before. She was trembling by the time he stopped. Eager for more, she brought his head back down to hers.

Nathan complied and wondered what was missing. He had her, just as he'd had many before. A few more kisses. A little more urging. He could spend the night taking her from peak to peak. For some reason, the idea had lost its appeal. He still wanted Liz—but did he really want her as she was now, tired from a hard day, more than a little tipsy?

Liz moaned against his mouth and moved her body against his. Nathan could have been carrying her off in search of a bed. Instead he held her away. Damn, his reactions were so different than he had imagined. Strangely enough, he felt ashamed.

So Nathan Hollister, the original scoundrel, behaved like the gentleman his grandmother had taught him to be. He disentangled Liz's arms from around his neck. He kissed her once more—on the cheek. Then he left

"Dear God," he whispered, "please tell me this feeling isn't what I think it is."

Floating on a tide of Irish whiskey and desire, Liz went to sleep easily, dreaming of Nathan's kisses. She awakened early, and for a moment she lay staring at the ceiling, wondering why she felt so good. Memories of the night before came flooding back. She remembered pulling Nathan back to her for another kiss. She remembered him leaving. Heat streaked up her body.

"That rat. That insufferable, smug skunk. How dare he leave!"

Dazed with fury, Liz groped for her telephone and punched in a number. "Maggie," she whispered when her friend came on the line. "Maggie, the worst thing imaginable has happened."

PEERING INTO the back seat of her car, Liz counted beribboned baskets. "One...two...three." She grinned at Nathan. "Three more stops and we're finished."

"Are you sure you don't have more in the trunk?"

"Well, if you're up to it-"

"No, no, that's fine," Nathan said, starting the car. "Where to now?" It was after three o'clock, and they had spent the day delivering holiday food to some of the neediest clients Liz's office had represented this year. Liz had organized the project.

She sighed. "I wish I had a couple of thousand more baskets and plenty of people to help get them out. What I'm doing doesn't even make a dent."

Nathan had to smile. This was only part of what Liz did for others. In two short weeks, he had learned a great deal about her generosity.

Last weekend Nathan had escorted her to the bar association's Christmas party. Liz seemed to know every prominent judge and attorney in this part of the state. The fact that her father had retired from the bench meant something, but Liz also seemed to have earned her colleagues' respect. All she had to do was ask, Nathan thought, and they'd hire her in a minute.

But instead of power lunches and partnership conferences, she was defending petty thieves and prostitutes. And delivering Christmas baskets to their families.

Her enthusiasm for everything she did endowed her with phenomenal powers of persuasion. She had convinced Nathan to help her instead of leaving for Memphis to spend Christmas Eve with his grandparents. He would go tonight after dinner with Eugenia.

Liz's voice broke into his thoughts. "What are you smiling about?"

"Christmases past," he replied evasively. He thought of last year, visiting his grandparents, sitting beside a warm fire and savoring the mellow taste of whiskey-laced eggnog. For some reason delivering baskets in the cold with Liz was more

appealing than that familiar, pleasant routine.

Together they had shopped, wrapped packages and decorated her tree. With Liz on his arm, he had dropped in on more holiday parties over the past two weeks than he could remember and been introduced to dozens of important people whose names and faces he filed away for future reference. Old habits died hard, Nathan decided, even though this was now secondary to the pleasure of being with Liz.

Each time before seeing her, he told himself to keep it light. And each time he forgot his own advice. He knew only one thing for certain: this was much more than sexual desire. If sex had been the issue, he felt sure they would be lovers.

For Liz wanted him. He could feel it in her kiss, in the way she trembled when he touched her. But he hadn't pushed. Though patience had never been Nathan's finest virtue, Liz was worth the wait. In fact, he was enjoying taking it slowly, wooing her, discovering her mind before he explored her body.

That evening Nathan stood at one end of a crowded room and studied Liz and her two friends. Clustered near the Christmas tree and wearing bright holiday clothes, they made a pretty picture.

Cassandra was flamboyant, with a cloud of black hair, flashing dark eyes and a curvy figure displayed to best advantage in an abbreviated red dress. Her dramatic style was contrasted with Maggie's warm, blond loveliness. But Nathan thought Liz's cool, classic style outdid them both.

"They're like a trio of beautiful jewels, aren't they?"

Eugenia's quiet voice drew his attention from the three friends and he nodded as he sipped his champagne. "And Liz is the most brilliant. She shines from within."

Eugenia placed a hand on his arm. "Liz sparkles so brightly because she has many facets, all of them deep. There are times when I wish she cared just a little less."

Nathan looked at Liz, too. She was now perched on the arm of Cassandra's chair, one hand on her friend's shoulder, but she was talking to Maggie's brother, Daniel. Her pose was that of a peacemaker, her beautiful face very serious.

Nathan's next words to Eugenia came out harshly. "I'm not going to hurt her, if that's what you're worried about."

The older woman shook her head. "Oh, Nathan, people hurt each other. That's inevitable. The thing you can't forget is to appreciate her."

Leaving her seat by Cassandra, Liz strolled toward them. "Okay, let's hear it," she demanded. "What are you two up to?"

Eugenia drew herself to her full height. "Really, Liz, must you know all my secrets?"

"You never tell me any of them."

"Then ask Nathan." The older woman frowned. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must go speak with Maggie. I can't imagine why she wants to go out with someone old enough to be her grandfather."

Laughing, Liz and Nathan watched her bear down on an unsus-

pecting Maggie, sitting alone by the fire.

"Eugenia will have to accept that not all her plans work out," Liz said.

Nathan lifted her hand to his lips. "Some of them do."

"Perhaps." Liz had hoped to sound aloof, but the feel of his warm mouth scattered her composure.

Nathan let his lips linger on her hand, imagining the warmth of skin he had yet to touch. It was all very well to be patient, but there were moments—such as now—when he wanted to back Liz up against a wall, to push his hands under her red-and-black spangled sweater, to place her hands on him, to watch every inch of her slender, fragrant body flush pink with excitement. After he had pressed himself into her softest depths, he wondered if she would be able to look at him with such cool blue eyes.

Appearing to sense the direction of his thoughts, Liz tugged her hand free and glanced toward the window. "Someone said it's going to snow tonight."

"Don't place any bets. How many times has Tennessee seen a white Christmas?"

"It could happen," Liz insisted. "And you're driving to Memphis."

"Interstate all the way. I'll be there in under three hours, even if it snows."

A tiny voice inside her said, *I don't* want you to go. But she ignored that and smiled. "I haven't even given you your present."

"How about now?"

The crowded room was entirely too public. "Let's go outside," she

suggested. "If it's going to snow, I want to see it begin."

After finding his present under the tree, Liz led Nathan through the kitchen. Jeannette was taking a tray of canapés from the oven.

"Are you leaving, chérie?"

"Just looking for some privacy," Nathan said, making Jeannette beam with pleasure.

Once they were on the kitchen's tiny side porch, Liz grumbled, "I guarantee she's reporting our whereabouts to Aunt Eugenia right now."

"Who cares?" Nathan brought her close for a very thorough kiss. "Umm, I think I just got my present."

Liz held his package behind her back. "Then I'll return this."

"Not a chance." In seconds, he was tearing the wrapping paper off. A mahogany-encased clock soon glinted in the light from the windows.

"I hope it's okay," Liz murmured. "Maggie said it would be perfect in the office she's putting together for you, and I—"

"She's right, and thank you." Setting the clock on the window ledge, Nathan silenced her with another kiss. Liz shivered.

"It's freezing out here. Maybe we should go back—"

"Not until you open this." The square black box bore the name of an exclusive jeweler emblazoned in gold across the top.

"Nathan, you shouldn't—"

"Open it before you say anything."

Liz obeyed, and a gold pin, crescent-shaped and crisscrossed by a narrow strip of diamonds, winked at her. "It looks like my earrings," she murmured.

"You wear them a lot. I wanted something to match."

"You went to a lot of trouble,"
Liz said. She glanced back at the pin.
"It's just beautiful, Nathan. Thank
you." She stepped into his arms,
shivering again and not from the
cold. When had she let herself fall
for this man?

"Turn around," Nathan whispered.

It had begun to snow. Forgetting the cold and laughing with pleasure, Liz drew Nathan into the yard. "Christmas snow," she said. "The best kind of magic."

Maybe magic was the source of the tingle Nathan felt as he gazed at Liz. But he had to leave now, just in case they really did have a white Christmas.

"The roads might be bad," Liz protested.

"The only bad thing would be disappointing my grandparents." Nathan brushed some snow from Liz's hair. "We're not close, but I won't let them down."

This glimpse into Nathan's feelings surprised Liz. He never said much about his family. She had to remember to ask Eugenia about his grandfather. But that could wait.

"I know you have to go," she whispered, turning on the step of the porch. "I wish you could stay." She brought his face down to hers, underscoring the words with her kiss.

'He drew back, framing her face between his hands.

"And if I didn't have to go, I'd be taking you up on the offer you made with that kiss." His voice was rough, as he pulled her back into his arms.

"Oh, sweet—" The words were lost as he crushed his mouth to hers. And while he kissed her, his hands were everywhere. They tangled in her hair and brushed across the hardening tips of her breasts before settling on the curve of her bottom as he fitted her body to his. His hips pressed hard against hers, and Liz was assured of how very tempted he was to stay.

"Okay;" she murmured. "I believe you."

"I'll be back day after tomorrow."

"Why does that seem so long?" Liz asked, admitting more than she'd intended about her feelings.

Nathan rested his forehead against hers. "I don't know, but it does. Maybe I'll come back tomorrow."

The snow was falling harder when Liz stood beside his car, kissing him goodbye again. She watched until his taillights disappeared down the drive.

If Nathan was as good as his word and came back from Memphis tomorrow night, she could see him in twenty-one... maybe twenty-two hours. How many minutes was that? she wondered.

He had her counting the minutes. She was lost. Utterly lost.

She felt that way until the next night when he appeared at her door. Give me strength, she prayed, lifting her lips to his. Just enough strength to stay out of this man's bed for a little while longer. Just until she was sure of why she wanted to be there.

HER MIND on the case she had just handled, Liz made her way through the crowded corridor. Her client had admitted his guilt in an assault on the manager of his apartment building. She had plea-bargained for the lightest sentence possible, and because her client had no prior record, he had gotten off easy. Open and shut.

So why wasn't she satisfied? Maybe it was her client's reason for attacking the man. That made her wish the owner of the building had been on trial.

Frowning, Liz started to glance at her watch when a hand took her wrist and pulled her to the side. A deep voice murmured, "Don't struggle, Counselor. That'll make it worse." Alarms jangled along her nerves.

Then she heard the chuckle.

"Nathan." She twisted around to face him. "You scared me."

"Hey, I'm sorry," he replied, really contrite. "I had an appointment nearby. I was hoping for lunch with my best girl."

"Oh, are all your other girls busy?" she teased.

With his thumb, he brushed the corner of her mouth. The gesture was quick, no more than a butterfly's touch, but the desire to open her lips and taste his skin almost overwhelmed Liz.

When she looked up, his smile had faded. "I don't have any other

girls," he whispered. "You know that."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Can you have lunch?"

Feeling disoriented, Liz glanced at her watch. "I've got a meeting in ten minutes."

"Then I'll walk you to your car."

"The meeting's upstairs."

"How about dinner?"

The question was rhetorical. They had dinner together almost every night. "Let's not go out. I'll pick up something on the way home. Can you make it at seven?"

Nathan nodded and kissed her forehead. "I'll bring the wine. Go have a good meeting."

How very domestic we sound, Liz thought as she walked away. She turned then and saw that he hadn't moved. He was watching her and she didn't have to imagine the smoldering look in his green-gold eyes.

That look sustained her through a dull meeting and the long hours of a dreary January afternoon.

Weeks ago Liz would have said it was impossible for two consenting adults who desired each other to wait as she and Nathan were. Based on what she had seen of his impatient nature, it was downright alarming, especially since she wanted him with such fierceness.

There had been a couple of men in Liz's life. She knew what passion was. She had played the sexy game of tease and touch and tantalize. But this waiting had taught her something new about arousal.

As she stood in line at the grocery store, her gaze scanned the magazines at the checkout counter. From one woman's magazine cover a caption jumped out at her—The Lost Art of Seduction. Lost art, my foot, Liz thought. Her skills might be a little rusty, but she knew something about seducing a man. Maybe that was what Nathan needed.

WARM AIR and delicious aromas enfolded Nathan as Liz opened the door to her apartment that evening. It feels like coming home, he thought as he kissed her.

"I'm honest-to-goodness cooking," she said, taking the bottle of wine while Nathan hung up his overcoat. "Bad day?" He looked up to find her studying him.

"No, no, not at all."

"Good. Then come and open this wine. I need it bad." She turned, and he wondered if it was his imagination or if her slender hips wiggled more enticingly than usual in her black stretch pants. Maybe it was because he had been thinking of the gentle curve of those hips...thinking of nothing but Liz ever since he had seen her at noon.

He couldn't see her without wanting to kiss her. He couldn't kiss her without wanting something more.

"Steady," he muttered to himself. "Remember to keep it light."

He paused in the doorway to the dining alcove. The candles on the table definitely weren't his imagination. Neither was the sparkling crystal or the fresh flowers or the sexy beat of jazz from the radio.

In the kitchen, Liz turned. Her oversize white sweater slipped from one shoulder, revealing smooth, glowing skin. "Dinner's ready. I hope you're hungry."

His eyes on her naked shoulder,

Nathan nodded.

"The corkscrew's down here." Liz bent down to a low drawer and as Nathan turned, his groin collided with her soft, round derriere.

The contact immobilized him.

"Don't move," he muttered, clamping his hands on either side of her hips. "Don't even think about moving." He pressed himself ever so slightly against her.

The motion made Liz catch her breath. "Nath..." The word dissolved into a sigh as his mouth descended to her uncovered shoulder. As his lips opened against her skin, the corkscrew in her hand clattered to the counter.

"So sweet. So very sweet." Eager to feel his mouth against hers, she tried to turn around.

"No," he whispered as his hand moved slowly up her hips and under the sweater to her bare skin.

Sparks, Liz thought while his touch lingered just below her breasts.

Combustion, she added when that touch slid upward.

With her nipples pebbling against his palms, Nathan buried his face in her hair. "Oh, Liz, you feel..." He searched for a word, but nothing had ever felt like this.

Liz arched her back and, raising an arm, trailed her fingers along his cheek. His hands lifted her breasts, and her sigh stretched into a moan of pleasure. Instinctively he ground his hips against her. He grew harder, heavier, and willed himself to hang on to his control. "Nathan." His name was equal parts plea and caress.

She succeeded in twisting in his arms this time, and their lips met in something that was more explosion than kiss.

Nathan stepped backward then, and Liz slipped her hand between their bodies. So much heat, she had time to think before he pulled her hand away.

"Not a good idea," he murmured.

"That's up to me." She looked up into his eyes. "Because I'm seducing you."

"I would say it's the other way around."

"You just got a little ahead of me, that's all."

"A little?" He grinned and brought her hand back to the juncture of his thighs.

"Nathan," she whispered, her eyes widening.

"Is that approval or shock?"

Tunneling through her hair, his fingers held her still while his mouth plundered hers again. Tension built inside Liz, until as if on cue, his hand strayed to her breast.

"This has to go," he said, tugging at her sweater.

Liz had never expected to feel shy. But as her sweater was tossed aside, her eyes fell under Nathan's regard.

With light strokes, he traced a line from her throat to each breast. "Oh, Liz. You're beautiful." Before she could react, he lifted her to the kitchen counter.

"Nathan!"

"Shh," he whispered and then placed a kiss on each breast. Quick

kisses. Then lingering. Blossoming roses, he thought as each coral-rimmed tip puckered.

Lost to the sheer abandon of the moment, Liz thought time itself ground to a halt. Her need was so tangible she could taste it. Restlessly she moved against Nathan. His lips strayed from her breasts up to her mouth, and she fumbled with his tie, which fluttered to the floor, then with his shirt.

"Too many damn buttons," she muttered. Then the material parted, and her hand slid over the muscles of his chest, fingers through the crisp whorls of tawny hair.

He caught her hand. "Liz, if you don't want to be taken right here and now, don't do that again."

"Maybe we should move to the bedroom."

"I hope I can walk."

"Maybe this will inspire you." Liz slipped from the counter and slowly, her eyes holding Nathan's, she peeled off her form-fitting stretch pants. Beneath them she wore only a filmy bit of black-and-red material.

His gaze lingered so long on the panties' lacy front triangle that Liz lost her nerve. "Don't you like them?"

"Yeah." He pulled her hard against his chest. "But I'm gonna like them better when they're off."

Later, Liz could never recall exactly how they got to her bedroom. But she remembered everything else.

The sheets were cool. Nathan wasn't. On his skin was the salty gloss of perspiration. Liz found the taste oddly exciting. More exciting

was the way he tugged her panties downward with his mouth. She wondered at his control as he touched her. Over and over. With his hands and his lips and his voice. His words inflamed her, sent her into the inferno once and then again.

And still he wasn't inside her.

"Please," she whispered, reaching for him, opening her legs in invitation. She was full of sensations, but she felt empty without him filling her, moving with her. "Now, please."

Nathan didn't know where he found the strength to be gentle, but with infinite care he drew Liz beneath him and fitted their bodies together.

The first velvet thrust brought her hips upward and pulled him deeper than he'd intended.

On the second, he forgot gentleness and stopped counting.

MINUTES—or was it hours?—later, Liz curled her body next to Nathan's side. "I'm speechless," she whispered.

He chuckled. "There's a first time for everything, Counselor."

"It isn't a first. You've been getting the last word since the beginning. I think that's what infuriated me."

"Were you infuriated?" His fingers traced the outline of her lips. "We've come a way since then."

She sighed. "A long way. Very fast."

"It doesn't seem fast to me," he answered.

"Six weeks," Liz said. "I don't usually do things this fast, Nathan."

"Sure you do."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you see someone who needs your help, you jump in, feet first." He kissed her. "Why don't you just think of me as one of your needy cases?"

"Needy?" Her hand dipped low across his stomach. "I don't think you need anything right now."

"Don't be so sure." To her surprise, he stirred at her touch.

"You're insatiable."

"I'm starved for a woman's touch."

"Okay." Giggling as she tossed back the covers, Liz straddled his lean hips. "How's this?"

"Good for a start."

She leaned forward, her hair falling like a silk curtain on either side of her face.

"This isn't how it usually is for me," he murmured, brushing her hair back from her face.

"So you're not always terrific in bed?" she teased.

He grinned. "That's not what I meant."

"You mean you don't usually wait this long to sleep with a woman you desire."

"You cut to the heart of matters, don't you, Counselor?"

"I'm not a fool, and believe it or not, I've dated a few men of your type in my day." She slipped back to his side and pulled the sheets up around them both. "So tell me, why did you wait this time?" Nathan turned on his side, facing her. "Liz," he murmured, touching her shoulder. "This isn't...you aren't what I planned on."

"What did you plan? A quick, easy affair? I'm not like that, Na-

than."

He sighed. "I knew that from the beginning. That's why it wasn't supposed to get this far."

"This far?" Liz repeated uneasily. "You make what's happened between us sound like a mistake."

"No, it's not a mistake, but it isn't what I originally intended, either." He paused and took a deep breath. "At first you were just convenient."

"Convenient?" Anger began to churn through Liz as she jerked away

from him.

And too late Nathan realized his attempt to be completely honest had been a miscalculation. But he plunged on, trying to explain. "I know it sounds terrible now, but I had this idea of using you—"

That sent Liz from the bed. She jerked a robe on and tied the belt. "Nobody uses me, Nathan."

"I know," he said lamely, getting up from the bed. God, he had

messed this up but good.

"Tell me something," she demanded. "Does anything really matter to you? Aside from your work?"

Nathan frowned at her. "Of course. I care about you. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"Oh, really? That's not how it

sounds to me."

He bit back a curse. "Liz, you've got to listen to what I'm telling you. I know I started out with the wrong

intentions, but that's all changed. I don't know where what we have now will lead—"

"Especially since users don't commit to anyone but themselves," she said scathingly.

"Liz," Nathan began. "I wish

you'd listen to me."

"And I wish I could understand what kind of person doesn't want commitment."

"That never seemed to matter. My father—"

"Yes, your father," Liz said with a bitter laugh. "Where does someone like you come from, anyway?"

"That's not important."

"Oh, but it is. It might explain why you're such a cold bastard."

This time the curse exploded from Nathan. He turned from Liz and started looking for his clothes.

The wounded look on his face drove the anger from her. "Nathan, please," she said now. "I'm so—"

Nathan pulled on his slacks and spoke in a cold, controlled voice. "Okay, Liz, let me tell you about my father. Or maybe I should start with my mother. She married my father for his money. Only he really didn't have any. Just a big old house with a good address. I wish Dad had told Mother all that before he married her. But she didn't figure it out until I was born. And then she left. For good.

"Now, you talk about cold bastards, Liz. That's exactly what my father became." He paused. "So I guess you're right, I'm just my father's son."

Liz was regretting that remark more with every passing moment. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Yeah, me, too," Nathan mut-

tered.

"Nathan, please don't leave." He couldn't walk out, not after what had happened between them. "Please." She saw Nathan hesitate. "I'm sorry. I guess I've been so sure you were going to hurt me that—"

"Liz." Nathan gathered her close in his arms. "God, the last thing I ever want to do is hurt you." She smelled so good, like flowers and sex. And he needed her in his life. "Liz, what I was trying to tell you is that you make me feel like good relationships are possible. I never felt like that before."

He kissed her then, a kiss such as they'd never shared, flavored with melancholy. But as always, it made her want him.

"Liz," he murmured. "My sweet

The words made her smile. "Your Liz."

"Too possessive for you?"

She shook her head. "But you have to prove it." With a smile, she untied her robe and let it drop to the floor.

"Gladly." He pulled at the buttons to his shirt, then shrugged it aside and stood to shed the pants.

Liz curled up on the edge of the bed, watching him. In the light from the lamp, his hair glinted gold. On his chest. On his thighs. Between them. Catching her breath at his sheer male beauty, she reached for him. He quivered at her touch, and she surrendered to a purely wanton impulse to press her lips to the skin just below his navel. Her reward was his sharply indrawn breath. Then he drew her upward till she kneeled on the bed.

"I'm going to try," he promised in a fierce whisper, and then he was kissing her, touching her. He wasn't slow this time. He was almost inside her before they fell back on the bed, and his long, ever-deepening strokes left no room for Liz to think about anything but pleasure.

They finally ate dinner at midnight, and Nathan spent the night with her.

He stayed the next night, too. And the next.

Nathan could feel himself fitting into the routine of Liz's life. By the weekend, his toothbrush was hanging beside hers in the bathroom. He pondered the significance of that for about a minute. Then he forgot it.

There were just too many other things to think about. Such as going to work on a new image for a client. Or hiring an assistant. Or touching the stars with Liz in his arms. He concentrated on the bits and pieces of life and ignored the overall picture.

It was better that way, he decided. Because what was happening between them quite literally scared the hell out of him.

And what did that say about their future?

That was another question he chose to ignore.

THE CORRIDOR was dingy, filled with the stale odors of food and cigarette smoke and as cold as the outdoors on this early February afternoon. Liz started uncertainly upstairs.

The handrail was solid beneath her hand, but a month ago, had been broken. When Marissa Lockhart had fallen from the stairs to the hall below, her father had attacked the man who managed the apartments.

Roy Lockhart was an undereducated, often unemployed man, whose wife, a waitress, provided the main support for the family. But Liz could forgive the man his rage, especially considering what might have happened to Marissa.

She thought the real culprit in the situation was the man who owned the building, Claxton Summerfield. All of his buildings seemed to be in similar disrepair, though they passed inspections—barely. Legally he couldn't be forced to do anything more than he did now.

The Lockharts couldn't even sue him over Marissa's injuries. The question of why a three-year-old had been playing alone on the stairs blew a hole through that plan, and the railing had been repaired the very afternoon she fell. His company had paid all her medical expenses and had agreed to pay for any future treatment. But in Liz's eyes it still wasn't good enough. The next time repairs were postponed, someone could be killed.

As she reached the second-floor landing, a door opened and a short, slender woman greeted her. "Come on in. I've been watching for you."

The apartment matched the corridor in shabbiness, but Cheryl Lockhart had used green plants to make it as cheerful as possible.

"Where's Marissa?" Liz asked. On her other visit the child had been ensconced on the sofa, her broken arm and leg propped up by pillows.

"My neighbor's got all three kids," Cheryl explained. "Somebody's sick at work, and they called me in a little while ago. I can use the hours."

"I'm sorry, we could have met tomorrow."

"I got time yet, and I knew you wanted this quick." Cheryl handed Liz a sheet of paper. "We went over the three buildings. I hope it's what you wanted."

The list of problems ranged from falling ceilings to broken windows and ineffectual heating. None of the improvements listed could be considered luxuries. And the tenants were willing to do much of the work themselves if Summerfield would supply the materials.

"This is exactly what I need," she told Cheryl. "What I'll do now is write Mr. Summerfield a letter, asking him to make these repairs. Maybe knowing an attorney is involved will get us somewhere."

"You don't think he'll be mad, do you?"

Liz smiled in reassurance. "Mad about what? We haven't done anything to make him mad—yet."

"Well, if he kicks us all out, it won't be easy to find another place we can afford."

"He won't. You pay your rent, don't you?"

"Yeah, but-"

"Then don't worry," Liz replied and glanced at her watch. "I've got to go, Cheryl. Is that car of yours

running, or do I need to give you a lift to work?"

After dropping the woman off, Liz was already fifteen minutes late for dinner with Nathan at their favorite restaurant. She found him at a cozy table near the window.

"You look like you just ran a marathon," he said, and then caught her to him for a brief but hard kiss.

Liz was warmed by his welcome. Smiling, she sat in the chair he pulled out for her and gave her drink order to a hovering waiter. Then she apologized for being late. "I had an important appointment."

"More important than me?" Nathan teased.

"Is that impossible to imagine?"

"Nearly." His hand slid over hers. "I'd be tempted to think it was another man except for the avengingangel zeal in your eyes. Who are you rescuing this time?"

Perhaps he didn't intend to be flippant, and under other circumstances, Liz might not have taken it that way. But she was tired, and the comment set her teeth on edge. "I'm so glad my little crusades amuse you," she muttered before pulling her hand away.

Nathan caught it again. "Hey, I'm sorry. I wasn't making fun of you."

She sat back in her chair and took a deep breath. "And I didn't mean to overreact. It's just been a long day."

THE NEXT FEW days were also filled with activity. She had a difficult case, a vagrant accused of a string of downtown holdups he said he hadn't committed. She fought an uphill

battle, and her losing verdict came in late Thursday afternoon. Disgruntled, Liz got to the office just as the receptionist was leaving.

"Cheryl Lockhart called," woman said. "She sounded upset. Since she doesn't have a phone, she

said she'd call you back."

"What a great way to end the day," Liz muttered. Yesterday she had received a reply to her letter from Summerfield's representative, a man named Eldon Rogers. Summerfield Properties refused to buy materials for all but the most minor improvements. Liz hadn't had time to let the tenants know, and she was toying with a more direct approach to the problem.

She had just sat down when the phone rang. It was Cheryl.

"Mr. Summerfield didn't like that letter," she said.

"I know," Liz replied.

"He sent one of his top men around here to talk to me."

Liz sat up, startled. "What? Did he threaten you?"

"No . . . not exactly."

"Then why are you acting so frightened?"

The woman's voice rose. "Listen, Miss Patterson, I appreciate what you tried to do for us. But maybe that man is right, and this is all we can expect for the rent we pay."

"And what about the others? Do they all want me to drop it?"

Cheryl hesitated. "I guess you'll have to ask them. But if they do anything else, I'm going to be blamed.'

"That's ridiculous, and giving up doesn't sound like you.''

"I got no money," the woman said. "I got three kids, a lousy job and an even lousier man, and if I have to pay a bunch of doctor's bills, I'm in deeper than ever. I'm thinkin' about just sending my kids to my parents for a while. They got it tough, too, but I don't know if I can make it on my own much longer."

Hearing her sound so defeated was more than Liz could bear. "Oh, Cheryl, please let me help—"

"No." she said slowly.

thank you, ma'am."

She hung up, and Liz felt as if she'd been slapped. How long she sat there, she couldn't say, but the offices were dark when she looked up and saw Nathan standing in the doorway.

"Something wrong?" he asked,

flipping on the light.

Blinking against the sudden glare, Liz nodded, but she didn't say anything. She didn't even notice that Nathan came around the desk. All she could hear was Cheryl's quiet, faintly accusing voice telling her to butt out.

"Everything, I guess," she murmured.

"Tell me about it." He drew her to her feet and into his arms.

How nice it was to lean on him and let him stroke her hair while she poured out all the details of her long, rotten day. When she got to Cheryl's call, she grew angry. "I'd like to know what that Summerfield had his man say to her. Cheryl told me she didn't need my help, but—"

"Oh, Liz," Nathan murmured. "When are you going to realize not

everyone wants your help?"

It was the wrong thing to say. He knew that the moment the words left his mouth. Liz stiffened in his arms. Her eyes were flashing when she drew away.

"I'm not the issue here. That man sent someone to intimidate a helpless woman."

"And he shouldn't have," Nathan agreed. "But that doesn't mean it's your problem."

"So you think I should drop it?"
He hesitated, then nodded. "Let it cool off."

"Until someone gets hurt or maybe killed?"

"If it's that serious, call whoever inspects buildings."

"Summerfield probably pays them off."

"Well, then you could fight them."

"Shouldn't I?"

Mentally counting to ten, Nathan took a deep breath. "Liz, I don't think we should get into an argument about something we already know we disagree on."

She backed away from him. "No, we should talk about it. Because what I do means a great deal to me—"

"How does this Summerfield deal have anything to do with your job?"

"It started out as a case."

"Yes, what started out as a case quickly became a cause. That happens all the time to you."

"Does something about that offend you?"

"No, but it hurts me to see you so torn up about the lives of people you barely know." "So I should be more like you write a check and consider my conscience clear?"

"Oh, God. Sometimes you can be the most smug—"

"And you can be the coldest, most apathetic—"

"Great," he cut in. "Well, let me tell you something, Liz, everyone can't play Lady Bountiful like you do."

"It's a choice some people make."

"And it's easy to decide what other people should do when you've been given everything a person could possibly want. You can spread the bounty and stand in judgment of those who can't be quite so generous with their time or their energy or their money."

She laughed. "Oh, dear me, and poor little Nathan has been so deprived."

That made him so angry, he grasped her by the shoulders. "Everything I have I've worked for, Liz."

"And I don't work?" she asked, twisting away.

"I didn't say that. I said you didn't have to worry about working. I do, and you know it."

"And I guess success has to mean everything in the world to you, too, doesn't it?" Liz challenged.

"Not everything, Liz."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I don't know if that's really true, Nathan. I don't think you know it, either."

The accusation caught him like a punch in the gut.

"You're right," he whispered. "I don't know how my priorities stand,

Liz, and until I do, maybe I should just leave you alone."

He left, his footsteps sounding hollow in the empty offices. It wasn't until she heard the outer door shut that Liz tried to call him back.

But by then it was too late.

By Two O'CLOCK that morning Nathan knew he had made a mistake.

At the same time he realized he was in love with Liz.

He loved her. The admission made his head ache and dulled the bite of the bourbon he was drinking. Good Lord, how had this happened?

Love wasn't an emotion he knew much about. He supposed he loved his grandparents. Supposed? He could imagine Liz's reaction if he said he *supposed* he loved his family. She just loved—and received love in return. It had never been so easy for him.

Oh, his grandparents loved him in their own vague, self-involved way. They depended on him, wanted to see him. They seemed to care if he was happy, and as he had once told Liz, they were all he had of family. That made some sort of bond. As for his father, Nathan had known exactly where he stood with him—he was a reminder of a broken heart. No matter what Nathan did, he couldn't make his father love him.

But he had tried. Being the best had mattered more than anything to his father, so Nathan had been the best. The smartest student. The top athlete. By now, striving for perfection and success was second nature to Nathan. It was all he knew. And it wasn't good enough for Liz.

"This is so stupid," he told his silent apartment. He and Liz were throwing something good away because she thought his ambition was selfish. But what did his ambitions have to do with what they had together?

As for his priorities...that was nonsense, too, and he should have realized it before getting angry and leaving her with the wrong impression tonight.

Keeping that thought firmly in mind, he pulled on his jacket and headed for Liz's apartment. He cautioned himself to be calm and reasonable and logical.

She came to the door on the third ring, and she didn't look as if she'd been asleep. In fact, her eyelashes were suspiciously damp, her nose was red, and she had the pale, wrung-out look of someone who had been crying.

Her fragile, exhausted look sent every bit of logic fleeing from Nathan's brain. "I love you," he said.

Liz took a step backward. "What?"

"I love you," he repeated. "Now can I come in?"

Like a sleepwalker, she moved inside. Then they faced each other across her living room.

"You didn't intend to love me at all, did you?"

"You're right," he admitted after a pause. "Loving you wasn't what I planned at all."

"Then why do you?"

He frowned. "Does it really matter why I love you, Liz? Can't it be enough that I do?"

She said nothing, staring at him

with big, blue eyes.

He took a step forward. "And don't you love me? Even just a little?"

Tears trembled on her lashes. "You can't love someone just a little bit, Nathan. At least, I can't. And I do love you."

The admission filled Nathan's heart to bursting. He closed the gap between them, gathering her close just as the first sob broke from her. "You don't sound too happy about it."

"I'm not," she choked out, pushing away. "I don't want to love you, either. You're nothing like the man I always thought I'd love."

With his hand under her chin, he lifted her face. "Is loving me really so awful?" He touched his mouth to hers then—gently. "Does that feel wrong?"

"That isn't the problem," Liz said "When you touch me, I believe everything's going to be fine. And then—"

"Maybe I should touch you more often," Nathan suggested before capturing her lips again.

Liz broke away. "Don't...don't do that."

"But everything else is so unimportant. What else can matter when I feel this way about you?" He placed her hand over his chest. He was warm against the coldness of her hand, and even through his sweater she could feel his heart pounding. "What can come between us when we know how right it can feel?"

Those simple words told her everything about the lonely heart hiding behind his carefree facade. No one had ever let him know he was really and truly loved. Damn his family, she thought. Don't they know how much they hurt him?

"I love you, Nathan," she murmured. Her arms stole around him. "I do love you. Please don't ever forget that."

He kissed her again, a kiss full of yearning that had nothing to do with sex. He was just one human being who needed the warmth, the caring of another. The kiss deepened, of course. It became a lover's kiss. Liz didn't think she'd ever be able to kiss Nathan without the heat. They would always have that fire—even if she kissed him every day for the rest of their lives.

And that was what she wanted—but she wasn't confident about getting her wish.

Unlike Nathan, she didn't think their loving each other solved their problems. Her doubts couldn't be erased, no matter how many times they made slow, exquisite love. No matter how often he repeated the words.

INSTEAD OF GROWING closer, admitting their feelings to each other seemed to send them in the opposite direction. Days passed, and they began to tiptoe around each other. Their spontaneity was gone.

A chasm grew and deepened between them, and Liz found herself waiting for their fragile world to simply split apart.

NATHAN TRIED for the third time to concentrate on a press release his assistant had put on his desk that morning. It was now almost four, and this had to go out in today's mail. He tried yet again, failed and finally scrawled his approving initials across the bottom of the page.

His preoccupation had started yesterday with a disconcerting phone call. It had continued today after a breakfast meeting. Now he had a big decision to make. On the up side, his business would benefit. On the down side, his relationship with Liz might have just started its final collision course with disaster.

He settled back in his chair, weighing his options. Taking this opportunity would improve his cash flow, but more importantly, it would be a springboard to bigger things, the sort of challenges and recognition he craved.

Damn, but here was the situation he had never expected to happen his work in direct conflict with Liz's.

He remained where he was, thinking, until the buzz of the phone cut through the silence.

"Hollister, this is Claxton Summerfield, and I'd like you to get over to my office this minute. I've got people picketing me, and a van from one of the television stations just pulled up. This kind of publicity won't do my candidacy any good. I know you said you needed a day or two to think it over, but I need you now."

This has to be Liz's work, Nathan thought.

"Hollister? What's it gonna be?"

Nathan hesitated. Then he took the plunge. "Okay, I'll be right over."

IT'S PERFECT, Liz thought, absolutely perfect.

Grinning, she crossed her arms and leaned against the marbled exterior wall of the building where the Summerfield offices were housed. In front of her, twenty-odd tenants marched in orderly fashion, hoisting their brightly lettered placards.

A female television reporter had just interviewed the tenant association president. He had presented the group's grievances just as Liz had coached him. She hadn't had to say a word.

How can Summerfield ignore this? Liz thought.

She was allowing herself just a touch of smugness when she saw Nathan step through the picket line. When he saw her, he looked grim.

"Nathan?" Liz said. "What are you doing here?"

"I..." He hesitated. "Liz, there's something ..."

"Hollister!"

They both turned as his name was called. A man Liz recognized as Eldon Rogers, Summerfield's representative, was hurrying toward them. Now how did Rogers know Nathan? Something Liz recognized as dread began to churn in her stomach.

"Mr. Summerfield's inside, wait-

ing for you, Hollister."

It took a minute for the words to sink in, but when they did, Liz felt the blood drain from her face. "Nathan?" she whispered, but his guilt-filled eyes only told her everything she didn't want to know.

"I was trying to tell you-"

"Oh, do you two know each other?" Rogers asked.

"Yes." Nathan's gaze didn't waver from Liz's. "And if you'll give us a minute—"

"Summerfield"

"-can wait," Nathan snapped, his expression making Rogers retreat without further discussion.

"Goodness," Liz choked out. "You're being awfully cavalier with a client, aren't you?"

"I only just agreed to work with Summerfield, Liz. He's going to run for the Senate," Nathan said. "That's why he hired me. I didn't know you were going to do this."

With a bitter laugh, she tossed her head. "Well, isn't that a pity? If we'd been exchanging any pillow talk about this, you could have warned him."

Nathan's voice was deadly calm. "You know I wouldn't have done that"

"Do I?"

"Liz-"

"Why?" she cut in. "Why are you doing this? You were bound to know how I would feel about it."

"But I think I can help."

"And how are you going to help, Nathan? What kind of slick lies will you come up with to make Summerfield look like a saint?"

"Liz, please," he murmured, trying to take her arm.

She jerked away. "Leave me alone, Nathan. I don't want to hear

any of your lies, either." Turning on her heel, she hurried down the sidewalk. If she stayed here any longer, she was afraid she'd be physically ill.

LIZ'S APARTMENT had never felt so small.

Still in the green suit she'd worn all day, she sprawled on the couch, head aching, listening to the messages on her answering machine.

Nathan called. Once. Twice. He said there were things she didn't understand, that they must talk, that he was going to persuade Summerfield to do something about the tenants' grievances.

The president of the tenants' association called, too. Summerfield wanted a meeting tomorrow; did she think that was okay? Liz gathered enough energy to pick up on the call. Sure, she told him, and if Summerfield didn't come up with any acceptable offers they'd go back on the picket line.

With the phone still in her lap, she replaced the receiver, already dreading the meeting. Nathan would probably be there, part of Summerfield's team.

"And I hope it makes him happy," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut against the tears that threatened. After tonight she promised herself she was never going to cry again over a man.

The phone rang again, and Liz answered before her machine could pick up. It was Eldon Rogers.

"I understand there's going to be a meeting tomorrow afternoon. I'm sure whatever you want to say can be said then," Liz told him. "But I thought we might save everyone the trouble."

Liz's head began to pound in double-time. "Mr. Rogers, I really have nothing to say to you at this time."

"Have you talked with your boy-friend?"

"My what?"

"Nathan Hollister. He is your boyfriend, isn't he?"

"That's none of your business."

"But I disagree," Rogers said. "Hollister is working for us—"

"For your boss," Liz interrupted.

"The point is that Hollister's relationship with you would seem to be in conflict with his work for us."

"That won't be a problem," Liz said. "Not anymore."

"But I can't be sure of that, now, can I?"

Liz's irritation began to turn to anger. "I have no reason to lie to you."

"Of course you don't," the man soothed. "But if we could work something out with the tenants now, then no one would question Hollister's loyalties. His association with Summerfield would never be in jeopardy because of you. I'm sure you wouldn't want that."

Now Liz knew his game. She understood why he had been able to intimidate Cheryl Lockhart. Full-blown fury made her voice shake. "You're saying that if the tenants give in, Nathan continues to work for Summerfield. But if not, he doesn't. Right?"

"Your words, Miss Patterson. Not mine. And the tenants wouldn't have to give in on all points. We could—"

"Forget it," Liz said bluntly. "And don't call me back." She

slammed the phone down.

"That slime." Oh, but Nathan had gotten himself mixed up with a wonderful group of people. She wondered what he would do if he knew what Rogers had just threatened. Ambitious though Nathan was, Liz didn't think he'd sit still for that.

There was only one way to find out. She'd tell him.

THE LAST person Nathan was expecting to knock at his office door after hours was Liz.

Silently he unlocked the door and opened it for her to pass. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm just great," she replied.
"This has been a terrific day."

Nathan ruffled a hand through his hair. It was nearly impossible to reason with Liz when she was like this. But he had to try. "I'd like to explain."

"You don't have to. I understand that this was an opportunity you

couldn't let pass."

Some of the tension went out of his neck. Maybe she did understand somewhat. "Okay, then have a seat."

"I'll stand, thank you."

"Liz, come on, don't act as if I committed a crime. I've got Summerfield talked into a compromise with the tenants. It's in his own best interest, of course. In fact, he's eager—"

"-to shaft them, I bet."

"Liz, please."

"I don't want to hear about your compromises. But I do think you need to know what Summerfield just did." Quickly, she told him about Rogers's call and his thinly veiled threats.

The information confirmed some suspicions Nathan had about him. What a weasel the man was. Aloud, he said, "I figured he'd do something like this."

Liz fell back a step. "You fig-

"There's something about that man—"

"I can't believe you. You expected the man to try and use you to get to me? And that didn't bother you?"

"Liz, you're not being fair."

"Fair! Tell me this," she whispered, stepping closer to him. "Is Summerfield a fair man? He's tried using you—"

"It was Rogers who called."

"Are you trying to say Summerfield didn't know anything about it?"

"That's what confuses me," Nathan replied. "Because the Claxton Summerfield I've dealt with so far doesn't seem like a man who would do any of this. The whole situation seems to have him bewildered."

Liz sucked in her breath. "This is how you justify doing what you do, isn't it? You convince yourself that the people you work for are always right. Then you can lie about them, because you believe the lies."

It hurt to hear what she thought him capable of. More than that, however, it made him furious. "Tell me something," he demanded. "Have you believed in the innocence of every person you ever defended in court?"

The question took Liz by surprise, and she faltered. "That's differ..." she began, then stopped. How many times had she thought she was different, her purposes nobler than Nathan's? That reasoning had never seemed trite until now.

Nathan hammered the point home. 'It's always different when it's something you want, isn't it, Liz?' He opened the door to his office. 'Tell you what,' he said, his voice tight. 'Why don't you go home? And whenever you decide you can listen to me without making judgments and assumptions, maybe then we'll talk this through. Until then, I don't have anything else to say to you."

"Nathan-"

He didn't wait to see if she left.

Suddenly exhausted, he sat down at his desk and looked over the press releases he had been drafting when Liz had shown up. Part of his plan was working. Summerfield was going to agree to most of the tenants' demands. Hopefully the details would be ironed out at tomorrow's meeting, and Nathan would release the news to the press. Summerfield would look like a good guy who had made a mistake and was rectifying it.

The funny thing was, he hadn't been all that concerned about his image. It had been Eldon Rogers who seemed worried about how all this was going to look.

Nathan thought back over this afternoon's meeting. Rogers knew Summerfield was going to help the tenants. So why had he tried to threaten Liz into dropping the matter? It was almost as if Rogers didn't want Liz and Summerfield to get together, as if he had something to hide.

Following his gut instinct, Nathan pulled a business card from his file and picked up the phone. When the man he wanted was on the line, he said, "We need to talk." He paused for the reply. "Why? Because I need some answers before we go any further."

THE CLEAR NIGHT sky held only questions for Liz. Every high, twinkling star seemed to be asking her why she had been so stupid.

Since leaving Nathan's office, she had driven at least once around the city. Going home was impossible. Every corner of her apartment would echo some laughter they had shared. Her bed would only remind her of the passion. She had been so self-righteously stupid and thoughtless. Every bit as guilty of tunnel vision as she had accused Nathan of being.

She must ask his forgiveness and hope he would want to try again. Even though he said he loved her, she had been so careless with that love that she wouldn't blame him if he ran in the opposite direction when he saw her coming.

What was she going to do? Almost automatically she turned her car toward the person she had always run to when she was hurt.

She found Eugenia curled up with a murder mystery. After one glance at her niece, she put down her book.

"I've been acting like seven hundred different kinds of fools," Liz said, sitting down beside her.

Eugenia shook her head. "I hope you didn't come here looking for sympathy. Because I don't have any for you."

SPRING HAD played a trick on Nashville, Nathan decided as he peered out the window. A cold, misting rain had replaced yesterday's sunshine.

"Mr. Summerfield?"

At the sound of the secretary's voice, Nathan turned from the window. She was addressing the man at the head of the long, glass-topped conference table.

"They're here," she said, and he stood. The other two men at the table followed suit. Nathan stepped forward.

Liz was the first person through the door. She was wearing the same gray suit she had worn the day Nathan had watched her in court, with the same jaunty red handkerchief tucked into the front pocket. But when he looked into her eyes, her expression was uncertain and maybe a little wistful.

While introductions were made around the table, Liz tried not to be obvious in her study of Nathan. He looked tired and pale.

"Shall we begin?"

Summerfield's booming voice jerked her back to the present, and she realized she had barely glanced at him. In his early to mid-forties, he

looked fit, with the ruddy complexion of an outdoorsman and auburn hair brushed with gray at his temples. His only feature that fit her preconceived notions was the shrewd, no-nonsense gleam in his brown eyes.

A formidable opponent, she decided.

Formidable but fair, she had to amend a few minutes later.

Summerfield had agreed to most of their demands. The most pressing repairs would be made right away. For the others, he would supply the materials, and as originally proposed, the tenants would provide the labor. Furthermore, he promised a response time of no less than twenty-four hours in the event of any situation that posed an immediate threat to anyone's safety. The tenants' association's board members agreed and it was wrapped up that fast. That easily.

"I want to express my apologies for the way this entire matter has been handled," Summerfield said. "Especially in regard to the conduct of my associate, Mr. Eldon Rogers. He's no longer in my employ."

Liz slanted a surprised glance at Nathan, who was already pushing away from the table.

"If it wouldn't be an inconvenience," he said to the tenants, "there are some members of the media waiting outside. Your demonstration yesterday caused a sensation of sorts, and Mr. Summerfield would be grateful if you'd agree to answer their questions, to tell them how you feel about the agreement that's been reached."

In minutes the room was filled with reporters. The news of Summerfield's expected candidacy must have leaked, Liz thought as she prepared to navigate toward the door.

"Miss Patterson?"

She turned to find Summerfield himself bearing down on her. "Is there something else, sir?"

"Only this." He put out his hand. "I think I owe you at least that much for looking out for my business. It's certainly more than I was doing myself. Thank you."

His handshake was firm. Perfect for a politician, she decided, suppressing a smile. "Just live up to your agreement. That's all the thanks I need."

Waving a goodbye to her friends, Liz headed for the door again. This time Nathan intercepted her.

"Wanna blow this joint?" He was smiling, hazel eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Don't you have a job to do?" she asked.

He nodded to an attractive blonde. "My assistant needs a trial by fire, and there's no time like the present." He took Liz's hand. "Come on."

"Nathan, we're in a strange person's office," Liz protested after he had led her out and through the first open door. "And I'll bet it's Summerfield's," she added, eyeing the large corner room with leather-upholstered furniture and an expansive view of the city. Nathan turned the lock on the door.

"What if he needs to get in here?" she asked.

"He owes you a favor or two." Nathan perched casually on the edge of the desk. "Besides, don't you want to hear about ol' Eldon Rogers?"

The last thing Liz wanted to discuss was Rogers. What about you and me? she wanted to say. "Don't tell me—Summerfield fired him because he was a jerk?"

"And a thief," Nathan replied. "Rogers has been in charge of those apartment buildings for five years, and he's been skimming money from the revenues. He confessed to everything this morning. The manager who was attacked was in on it with him. That's why he liked getting the rent in cash."

"Didn't Summerfield think something odd was going on when the manager was beaten up and his company paid all of Marissa Lockhart's medical bills?"

"Rogers was able to hide it."

Liz shook her head in disbelief. "So you were right, Summerfield wasn't the villain at all. I should have listened to you last night." She stepped closer. "I guess busy men can lose track of important details."

"Help me make sure I don't do that," Nathan murmured as he caught her hand in his and pulled her to him. "Can you believe me when I tell you I know what's most important in my life?"

She raised her hand to his face. It was so handsome, and so very dear to her. "I'll accept that you've got your priorities in line if you'll believe me when I tell you how sorry I am for the way I've acted."

"Well," he admitted, "you don't cut a man much slack, Miss Patterson."

"What a perfectly diplomatic answer," she murmured, grinning. Then she sobered. "I've been acting like an inflexible little hypocrite, and that's a direct quote from Eugenia."

"Not a hypocrite," Nathan replied.

"How about inflexible, then? Or unyielding? Judgmental? I believe she used all of those adjectives in putting me in my place last night. I wouldn't blame you if you had decided I didn't deserve to be loved."

"Oh, no. There's no chance of that." Nathan lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her with all the pent-up yearning and frustration of the last few days. His hands slid up to her softer-than-silk hair, destroying her carefully arranged bun.

Laughing, she drew away and shook her head. The chestnut strands tumbled about her shoulders.

"I love you," Nathan said fiercely. "But I can't promise you it will be easy. I know I'm still going to make you angry."

"I don't think I could love you if you didn't."

"But I'll never do anything to hurt you, Liz. Nothing will ever come between us again. Not my business—"

"Not my causes, either," she promised.

"How about if we just try to support each other, respect each other's differences?"

"A very sensible plan."

"You know what? I could attain each and every one of my goals, and it wouldn't mean anything to me if I don't have you." He kissed her again.

Liz pulled back and her breath actually caught at the look in his eyes. "I love you, Nathan."

"And do you still think love's not enough?"

"It is when you add some trust." She pressed her lips to his chin. "And some respect." Her mouth moved over his, lightly. "And some patience."

"More of Eugenia's words of wisdom? She's some smart old bird," he murmured.

"And she'd better never hear you call her that."

"Wouldn't she forgive a close relative?"

"Maybe."

"Then marry me," Nathan whispered. "I'd like to be part of the family." His lips captured hers again. His hands skimmed down her body, the sides of her breasts, the outer edge of her hips.

Liz's reaction was the same as it had been the first time he touched her. She shivered from the heat. "Promise me," she said, "that even after we're married for fifty years, it'll still feel like magic when you do that."

"I'll try. That's all I can promise."

"Then it's good enough for me."
He grinned. "You need to promise me something, too."

"Anything."

"A vote for Summerfield. I need the support."

Liz giggled. "Well, I don't know that he shares my ideological point of view. But—" she slipped her hands under his jacket "—you could do some serious campaigning. It's early yet. My vote could be won."

"I'll do my best," he murmured, bending his head toward hers. But before they could kiss, a knock sounded at the door, followed by Summerfield's angry voice demanding to know what was going on.

Nathan rolled his eyes heavenward. "If his timing stays this rotten, I may not vote for him myself."

EUGENIA PAUSED midway down the staircase, struck by the perfection of the sights and sounds below her. The foyer was filled with music and laughter and the whirling colors of couples dancing.

The scene could have been taken from her own youth, when the doors of this big old house had opened wide to receive her friends, the days when she was the life of any party.

But this day belonged to Liz. And to Nathan.

And how happy that made her sentimental old heart.

They were at the center of the dancing crowd. Against his black tuxedo jacket, her white satin dress swirled like snow. Such a contrast they were. But so complementary. Now, as Liz's diamond earrings caught the light from the chandelier, they matched the sparkle in her eyes when she looked at her groom.

Eugenia turned as Jeannette came to stand beside her.

"Our Liz is happy. Right, ma-dame?"

Smiling, Eugenia nodded. "Yes, very happy."

"But the others." Jeannette shook her head sadly. "What are we to do?"

Frowning, Eugenia glanced back to the crowd. Sure enough, Maggie was sidelined with that insufferable bore named Don. Cassandra was dancing, but not with the person Eugenia was certain she belonged with. She sighed. "I guess our work is never done, Jeannette."

But before she rejoined the party, Eugenia paused for a moment more on the stairs. She looked at Nathan and Liz, and she let the music take her back. To another night. In another age. To the scent of flowers and the touch of one man's lips.

To have known romance, she thought, oh, but that made one whole.



Solution to CROSSWORD #27 VOL.5 NO. 3

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JUDITH ARNOLD Comfort and Joy



Jesse didn't believe in Christmas. He wished people would give of themselves every day of the year. He'd lost his faith...until, miraculously, he met a certain divorcée and her remarkable young son....



Robin felt like a restless school-child—which wasn't surprising, given she had spent nearly half an hour squeezed into an undersized chair attached to an undersized desk in Room 128 of the Brushy Plain Elementary School, listening to Ms. Becker describe what she had been doing with her seven- and eight-year-old charges for the past three months, and what she was planning to do with them for the rest of the term.

"So, as you can see," the young woman at the front of the room chattered, "we did a great deal to commemorate Thanksgiving. But kids will be kids. They're already badgering me about Christmas. So I've begun making plans for our class to celebrate that holiday, too. The turkey dittos they colored were such a hit, I've prepared some lovely dittos of Christmas trees for the children to color in." She lifted from her desk a ditto stencil featuring an outline of a pine tree and displayed it for the parents. "In addition to decorating the trees, we'll be performing a classroom skit," Ms. Becker continued. "I've found a marvelous dramatization of Dickens's A Christma's Carol for the children to perform. We're also going to have a grab-bag gift party," Ms. Becker announced. The perfect

circles of her auburn curls bounced around her face as she spoke.

"Excuse me, Ms. Becker, but don't you think that celebrating Christmas in a public school might be riding roughshod over the Constitution?"

The voice came from the doorway, and, slamming her knees on the polished wood of the desk, Robin shifted in her chair to locate its source. A man was lounging against the doorjamb. His eyes were nearly as dark as his hair, and they were set deep beneath a high, fierce brow. Robin didn't know that men so strikingly handsome actually lived in a town as sleepy and predictable as Branford.

Ms. Becker seemed rather flustered by the man's question. "Hello, Jesse," she said, managing a smile. "I don't think there's any need to worry about the Constitution," she rationalized, partly to the man she'd called Jesse and partly to the assembled parents contorted in their tiny desk chairs. "We discuss Chanukah in class, too, of course. We discuss the history of this special Jewish holiday. It isn't as if we deal with Christmas to the exclusion of all other religious holidays."

"You discuss Chanukah," echoed the man. His voice was low and smooth. "Do you also discuss the Eastern Orthodox Christmas? Tet? Native American seasonal rites?"

"Well..." Ms. Becker moistened her lips anxiously and grinned. "The fact is, the children are the ones who want to discuss Christmas. I mean, it's all around them. Even before Thanksgiving, the stores were already starting to put up their Christmas decorations. And, let's face it, Christmas is a school vacation. I'm sure that makes it even more significant to them."

The man shrugged. Observing the graceful motion of his broad shoulders as they shifted inside his jacket, Robin sighed. Being a divorced mother with a demanding job didn't leave Robin much time for meeting men, but...she ought to do something about reviving her social life. Maybe if she did, the man in the doorway wouldn't look quite so enchanting to her.

"Well," Ms. Becker said, beaming at the roomful of parents. "I'd like the opportunity to meet each of you individually. So why don't you have a look at our displays, and I'll circulate among you."

Robin climbed out of her chair. She slipped her blazer on, smoothed her hair back and refastened the barrette holding it in a limp ponytail. Her hair was as fine and blond as it had been when she was a toddler.

"You're Philip Greer's mother, aren't you?" Ms. Becker picked Robin out of the crowd and extended her hand. "I'm so glad you came tonight. There's something I wish to discuss with you," she said.

A subtle but sickening sense of dread curled through Robin's gut. Was Philip in trouble at school?

Inhaling to steady her nerves, she asked, "Is there a problem with Philip?"

"I'm not exactly sure, Ms. Greer," Ms. Becker confided. "He's such a bright boy, his reading and arithmetic skills are way above grade level and he seems popular with his classmates. But...well, look at this." She pointed at a picture of a bright orange turkey with purple hands. "He drew hands on his turkey. He told me that his turkey came from another planet—Geek or Bleep or something—"

"Gleek," Robin supplied. Gleek was a make-believe universe Philip had invented a few months ago. Whenever Robin ordered him to do something he didn't want to do, he would argue that on Gleek the kids never had to make their beds or pick up their dirty clothes or do their homework when Masters of the Universe was on TV.

"That's right. Gleek," said Ms. Becker with a vigorous nod. "He told me that on Gleek the turkeys always have hands because turkeys can't fly anyway, so their wings don't serve any purpose. He told me that Gleekians—or whatever he called them—decided to breed their turkeys to have something useful, like hands, instead of wings."

Robin smiled. "Philip has an active imagination," she granted, "and I like to encourage him. Ms. Becker, it's only a suggestion, but instead of making the children color in your

pictures, why don't you let them draw their own? I think it would be more challenging for them. And instead of having them enact A Christmas Carol, why not let them write their own skit?"

Ms. Becker pursed her glossy pink lips and her eyes narrowed on Robin. "Ms. Greer, these are secondgraders. They need direction, they need guidance—"

"And they need a little freedom to use their imaginations," Robin asserted.

"Well," Ms. Becker said with a dubious huff. "I'll...I'll think about it."

"Good." Realizing the need to appease the teacher, Robin added, "I think you're doing a terrific job, and Philip's learning a great deal." Thirty-three years of living had taught her the benefit of diplomacy.

Ms. Becker's face brightened. "Thank you, Ms. Greer. I confess, this has been an extremely rough autumn for me, but I'm glad to know I'm reaching the children."

Robin nodded and bade the teacher a polite farewell. An extremely rough autumn, she pondered, watching as Ms. Becker was engulfed by a swarm of avid parents. Obviously she was coping with problems that had nothing to do with her pupils.

"You told her off, didn't you?"

She spun around and found herself staring into the dark, luminous eyes of the man Ms. Becker had called Jesse. "Jesse Lawson," he introduced himself, reaching out to shake her hand. "And you're...?"

"Philip Greer's mother," she said automatically.

The sound of Jesse's sonorous laughter caught her attention. "That's an awfully long name. What do people call you when they're in a hurry?"

She laughed as well. "Robin. Robin Greer." She felt herself relaxing. "Which kid is yours?"

His smile remained. "I haven't got a kid. I'm here as a favor to Eileen. She asked me to drop off some documents she's been waiting for."

It didn't take Robin much effort to remember that Ms. Becker's first name was Eileen. Then she remembered his interruption during Ms. Becker's presentation. "Did you really mean that, about how celebrating Christmas in class is riding roughshod over the Constitution?"

His eyes darkened briefly. "I think there's too much emphasis on Christmas."

"Too much? How can there be too much emphasis on something so wonderful?" As far as Robin was concerned, there could never be too much Christmas.

Jesse's attention had turned to the bulletin board. "Philip," he reflected, locating the bizarre orangeand-purple turkey. "Are the hands supposed to signify something?"

Robin laughed. "I guess they're supposed to signify that Philip has a mother who encourages independence rather than conformity." Jesse's smile returned as he rotated back to her. "And what does Philip's father say about that?"

"Not much," Robin answered. "Philip's father and I are divorced."

"Ah." Something sparked in Jesse's eyes as they roamed across her small, hollow-cheeked face, and one corner of his mouth skewed upward in a lopsided smile. Then his gaze drifted past Robin and snagged on Ms. Becker. "If you'll excuse me for a minute, I think Eileen is temporarily free."

Robin watched him stride down the side of the room to the teacher, who had extricated herself from yet another cluster of parents. Robin sidled along the row of desks. Eavesdropping wasn't the most polite thing to do, but she was curious to know why mention of her divorce had caused Jesse to abandon her.

He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a legal-size envelope. "Here you go," he said, handing it to Ms. Becker. "Signed, sealed, delivered. I imagine congratulations are in order."

Ms. Becker appeared flustered again, and then suddenly grateful. Her eyes glistened slightly as she accepted the envelope from Jesse. "I really appreciate your coming down to the school just to bring this to me. It's just—I wanted it in my hands, tonight. Just to get it over with, to have it with me—"

"I understand."

Ms. Becker's teary eyes met Jesse's for a moment. "Are you sure I can't pay you for this?"

"Positive," he said gently. "I'm glad I could help."

She hadn't expected Jesse to turn around so suddenly. He found her standing indefensibly close to him, and her abashed expression informed him that she had overheard his conversation with Ms. Becker. Yet instead of appearing angry, he smiled. "That's my good deed for the day," he said. "I think I deserve extra credit for doing it in front of a witness."

"Your good deed?" Robin mumbled, trying unsuccessfully to hide her chagrin.

"She needed some minor legal assistance, and I was able to help her out. I was going to drop the papers off at her house this evening, but by the time I got home she had already left for school. She had taped a note to her front door, asking if I wouldn't mind bringing the papers here. She didn't want to have to wait until tomorrow."

The only legal paper Robin had ever been that anxious to have in her possession was her divorce decree.

An extremely rough autumn. Ms. Becker's words resounded inside Robin. "You handled her divorce," she blurted out.

He appeared surprised by the accuracy of Robin's guess. He glimpsed the teacher, who smiled as she conferred with another student's mother. "I don't think she wants the news broadcast in a big way," he said.

"I won't breathe a hint of it," Robin promised, surprised that she'd guessed right. Then another sur-

prise jolted her—Ms. Becker had offered him payment, and he'd refused. What sort of lawyer didn't take money for his services?

"Why won't you let her pay

you?" she asked Jesse.

He shrugged. "I didn't do much. She had her own lawyer negotiate the settlement, but he's away on vacation now, and the other side was sitting on the papers too long. I just called them for her and gave them a nudge."

She turned away, following Ms. Becker with her eyes for a moment. Then she shook her head. "I'm sorry for her," she commiserated.

"Are you? You don't seem sorry

for yourself."

Her head snapped back to Jesse. His face was impassive, and she recognized that he had simply stated the truth. "I'm not. I've got Philip. And I've got the house, my job—"

"Where do you work?"

"Woodleigh's," she told him. "On the Post Road."

"Woodleigh's?" he repeated uncertainty. "Is that a store of some sort?"

His ignorance startled her. Woodleigh's served an affluent clientele. Her store specialized in hand-blown crystal and hand-painted ironstone, fine linens, Danish modern flatware, and all sorts of elegant knick-knacks. There were currently four Woodleigh's outlets, all located in shoreline Connecticut towns, all catering to the upwardly mobile, the yuppies, the lawyers who were likely to wear expensive leather jackets.

"Yes," she remembered to answer him. "It's a store. I'm the manager. And—especially at this time of year—I'm much too busy to sit around moping—"

"Green!" a familiar voice squawked shrilly into her ear. "Oh

my God, it's green!"

Spinning around, Robin found her friend, Joanna, glaring at one of the crayoned turkeys on the bulletin board, her hands on her hips and her face contorted in a grimace. "Hi, Joanna," Robin hailed her.

"Look at this, Robin! Jeff col-

ored his turkey green!"

"What's wrong with green?"
Robin asked, laughing. "At least his turkey has wings."

"Robin," Joanna said sternly. "I happen to make the best roast turkey this side of Chicago. Now, what do you think Jeff is trying to tell me when he colors his turkey green?"

"I think he's trying to tell you that green was the first crayon he pulled

out of the box."

Joanna started to laugh, too. Then her eyes wandered past Robin and she fell momentarily silent. "Oh," she said contritely. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Robin bailed her out with a smile and a courteous introduction. "Joanna, this is Jesse Lawson. Jesse,

Joanna Calloway."

Joanna shook Jesse's hand, then shot Robin a quizzical glance. "Lawson? I didn't know there was someone named Lawson in the class."

"There isn't," Jesse smoothly corrected her. His gaze shuttled be-

tween Robin and her friend, and he nodded. "It was a pleasure meeting you both," he said by way of parting. "Green is great, but—" his eyes lingered on Robin for a split second longer "—purple hands are exceptional. You must be quite a mother, Robin Greer."

With an economy of motion Robin found strangely hypnotic, he pivoted on his heel and strolled out the door.

Robin stared at the empty door-way through which he'd vanished.

GLANCING UP from the cash register, Robin saw him.

She dropped the box she had been assembling.

"Hello, Robin," Jesse said in that delicious voice of his.

She presented him with a surprisingly relaxed smile. "Hello, Jesse. I see you've finally decided to find out what Woodleigh's is. Are you looking for something special?" she asked.

He opened his mouth, then shut it and gazed around the shop. His gaze circled the room, pausing at one of the butcher-block tables with its matching cane-and-Haitian-cotton chairs, pausing again at the colorful array of place mats and tablecloths exhibited against one birch-paneled wall, and again at the hand-painted toy-soldier nutcrackers lined up in formation on a shelf bedecked with holly. When he turned back to Robin, his eyes seemed darker, shadowed by an undefinable sadness.

"What's wrong?" she asked instinctively.

He shook his head and grinned. "I was just thinking about some people I visited today for work. I was thinking about their apartments and how out of place these things would be inside them."

"Do lawyers make house calls?"

"Legal aid lawyers do, sometimes."

A legal aid lawyer? Since when could legal aid lawyers afford extravagant suede jackets? That sweater had to be angora, and his loafers appeared hand-stitched.

"Would this stuff be out of place in your home?" she asked. It was admittedly a nosy question, but she couldn't imagine a man like Jesse Lawson living in the sort of house a legal aid lawyer might be able to afford.

He shrugged. "At the moment, anything would look out of place in it," he confessed. "I moved here from Los Angeles six months ago, and except for a few pieces of necessary furniture, I haven't done much with my place."

"Do you live in Branford?"

"In one of the condominiums off Brush Plain Road," he replied with a nod.

"Some of those condominiums are pretty classy. Your home would probably look nice with a few fancy items in it. A wine rack, maybe, or some of these crystal tree ornaments?"

"I didn't come here to shop," he admitted quietly. "I came here to see you."

Robin laughed. She often laughed when she was shocked. "What did you want to see me about?" she asked guilelessly.

A tender smile danced across Jesse's thin, strong lips. "About your son, I think. I'd—I'd like to meet him," Jesse said. "Any boy who's got the guts to draw hands on a turkey must be pretty special."

She wondered what Philip would say if she brought Jesse home—she wondered what he would say if she brought any man home.

And yet the idea of bringing Jesse home had an undeniable appeal to it. "We close up in half an hour," she told him. "If you want to stick around until then, sure, you can meet my gutsy son."

Her gaze locked with his for an instant. Despite his affable smile, there was something somber in his dark, piercing eyes, something earnest and oddly wistful.

THE DOOR swung open, and Robin hollered, "Phil? I'm home!"

A wiry towheaded youngster bounded into the living room from a hallway behind the staircase. "Hey, Mommy!" he shouted, springing into her arms and giving her an exuberant hug. "Who's this?" he asked, releasing his mother and fixing his gaze on Jesse.

Philip looked exactly like Robin—or at least, exactly like a seven-year-old male version of Robin. His hair was the same flaxen shade, had the same flyaway texture. His eyes were as bright and multicolored as hers, his cheeks as cleanly defined, his jaw

as pointy. His build, like hers, was slim yet strong, exuding energy.

"This is Jesse Lawson," Robin said. "Jesse, my son, Philip, on leave from the planet Gleek. Hi, Kate," she greeted the plump silver-haired woman who had entered the room behind Philip. "How did it go to-day?"

"No problems," Kate O'Leary reported, eyeing Jesse curiously as she moved past Robin to the entry closet for her coat.

"By the way, Kate, I'm going to have to work late a couple of nights this week—"

"No problem," Kate assured her, slinging on her coat and reaching for the front doorknob. "I could use the extra money—lots of presents to buy."

"You gonna buy me a present?" Philip asked, climbing up to the second step of the staircase and then jumping down dramatically. "I'm gonna buy you one."

"You are?" Kate feigned utter astonishment. "In that case, I'd better revise my shopping list. So long, everybody. See you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Kate." Robin left the porch light on for her, then locked the door and removed her jacket. "Give me five minutes to change my clothes," she requested, "and then we'll have some dinner."

But by the time Robin returned to the living room, Jesse and Philip were gone. She heard her son's piping voice floating out of the den.

She strode to the doorway and found Jesse seated on the sofa and

Philip kneeling on the coffee table facing him, holding the poor man captive as he displayed for him various stamps, papers and envelopes, which he pulled from an old shoe box. "This one, it's from Mexico," Philip announced. "This one's from Brazil. They speak Portuguese there. Did you know that? My dad doesn't really understand Portuguese, but he speaks Spanish real good. Mostly my dad goes to Spanish places, like in South America and the West Indies and stuff, so he can talk to the people. Sometimes he gets stuck going to Brazil or something, though. Then he needs a translator."

"Philip?" she said, trying not to sound disapproving as she entered the den. Not only had Philip been sharing his father's letters with Jesse, but he'd brought Jesse into the messiest room in the house—not counting Philip's bedroom, of course. "Perhaps you could give me a hand setting the table."

Philip shrugged. "Okay. I guess I gotta wash my hands, then." He pranced out of the den and vanished into the downstairs bathroom.

Robin risked a glance at Jesse, who was rising from the sofa. If Philip had made him uncomfortable by discussing Ray, Jesse didn't show it.

He offered her an amiable smile and crossed the room to join her at the doorway. "Gleek—that's Philip's make-believe planet, right?"

She nodded. "Among other things, Gleek is a place where sevenyear-old boys do everything they aren't supposed to do on earth, and don't do anything they are supposed to do here."

PHILIP MONOPOLIZED the mealtime conversation with a long-winded description of his day in school. Robin eyed her son's plate. He had distributed his uneaten green beans around the dish as if by dispersing them he would give the impression of having consumed most of them. She considered nagging him to finish his vegetables before dessert, then decided not to.

"Why don't you help me clear the table, and then you can have some cookies and milk in the den."

Philip let out a hoot. He bolted from the table, gathering his plate and silverware, and charged into the kitchen.

Robin smiled at Jesse. "We can have some coffee in the living room, if you'd like," she offered.

"Coffee sounds great," he said, standing and lifting a few dishes.

It didn't take long to clean up the dishes and cram the leftovers into the refrigerator.

She sat on the chintz-covered sofa and gestured for Jesse to take a seat beside her. "I'm sorry about that stuff with my ex-husband's letters," she said.

Jesse eyed her steadily. His lips shaded a hesitant smile. "Don't be." He took another sip of coffee, then leaned back against the cushions, stretching his long legs out under the table. "I take it your son and your ex-husband are close."

"As close as they can be, given that Ray travels so much. Whenever

Ray is stateside, he spends as much of the furlough as possible with Philip."

"Furlough?" Jesse questioned her. "Is he in the armed forces?"

Robin laughed and shook her head. "Just a habit of speech," she explained. "I spent my youth as an army brat. I've gotten most of the military jargon out of my system, but every now and then a word slips in."

Jesse continued to study her. "Why did you get a divorce?" he asked.

She accepted his question in the spirit in which it had been posed. "When I was growing up, we moved around a lot. Every two or three years, my father would be reposted, and we'd ship off to a new base. We never had roots, we never had a real home." She shrugged. "It amazes me that Philip and Jeffrey—you met his mother, Joanna, at the Open School Night—it amazes me that the boys have known each other practically since their conception. Until I moved to Branford, I had never lived in any one place for so long."

"And now your ex-husband travels all over the world," Jesse noted.

Robin grinned. "Bingo." She drank some coffee, then nestled deeper into the couch's plush upholstery. "Ray had traveled a lot as a child, too. When we met, I told him that my dream in life was to have a real home. He took a job teaching economics at Yale, and we bought this house, and I dug in my roots. And then..." She sighed wistfully. "Neither of us was used to living in

one place for so long, but I loved it. He never got used to it. So he took a job with the Agency for International Development. The next thing I knew, he was being shipped off to Honduras for on-site observations. And..." She sighed again. "I stayed here. We just grew apart—literally, I guess."

"And now you have your home,"
Jesse concluded.

"A home, a job, a son... a place where I can plant perennials and watch them bloom." Her gaze journeyed around the cozy living room. "The tree is going to go in that corner," she murmured, pointing to a nook beside the fireplace. "It always goes there. Christmas means being with Philip and having our tree in that corner."

A shadow flickered within his eyes, and he shifted slightly on the couch.

She twisted on the cushions to face him fully and inquired, "Don't you like Christmas trees?"

He glanced at his coffee cup. "I don't believe in Christmas."

She gaped at him. There was nothing defensive in his claim; he'd stated it as bluntly as she'd stated her question.

"I'm an atheist."

"An agnostic, you mean?"

"I mean I'm an atheist," Jesse insisted.

"Just like that?" She peered at the man beside her. She noticed a shadow hovering over his sharply chiseled features. He stood and ambled to the window. "When I was thirteen years old, my sister died of leukemia."

"Oh, God," Robin groaned.

"Everybody said, 'God loved Marybeth so much, He wanted her in heaven with Him.' And all I could think was, if there was a God, He would have let her live a full, happy life. He wouldn't have made her suffer so much before she died. Religion offers easy answers. It's a lot easier to say 'God works in mysterious ways' than to say Marybeth got unlucky, her blood cells got screwed up and she died."

"Did losing your sister turn your parents away from God, too?" Robin asked.

He issued a short, dry laugh. "Hardly. They've made a full-fledged career of their devoutness. I tried it their way, Robin. I honestly tried. But it never really made sense to me."

"And not believing does make sense to you?"

"It allows me to be who I am and to do what I want," he explained cryptically. "It enables me to help someone simply because I want to see them smile, without worrying about whether I'm scoring points for the hereafter."

Robin lapsed into a bewildered silence. She wasn't going to persuade him to rethink his views of religion. He was entitled to his beliefs—or his non-beliefs—and he was a decent human being. In his profession, he could be raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees, but instead he made house calls as a legal

aid lawyer. Whether the goodness came from within or without didn't matter. Jesse was a good man.

"Yikes," she groaned. "It's past Philip's bedtime. God knows what he's been watching on TV all this time."

"No," Jesse said with a laugh. "God doesn't know. Only Philip knows."

Robin chuckled, too. "Well, his mother is about to find out." She sauntered into the den and found Philip seated on the floor, barely ten inches from the television, watching a shoot-'em-up scene of mayhem on the screen. "Bedtime, pal," Robin announced, lifting the empty cookie plate and milk glass from the coffee table.

"Awww!" Philip automatically whined, although he obediently stood and turned off the set. "Was your mother this mean, Jesse?"

"She was much, much meaner," Jesse said soberly. "If I were you, I'd count my blessings and put on my pajamas."

"Oh, all right," Philip relented, issuing an exaggerated sigh. "Bye, Jesse."

"Good night, Philip."

Philip plodded up the steps.

"I guess I should be leaving," Jesse said, lifting his blazer from the chair where he'd left it. Jesse turned to the front door, then hesitated and spun back to Robin. "I'd like to see you again," he said.

He was asking her for a date. The first time in thirteen years that she was faced with the possibility of a date with a man other than Ray. Her reply came easily. "I'd like to see you again, too."

"What night's good for you?"

"Friday?" she suggested.

"Friday," Jesse confirmed. "I'll be here at seven. Get a baby-sitter." Then, so swiftly Robin couldn't prepare herself for it, he bowed and kissed her. It was a light, friendly kiss, landing half on her lips and half on her cheek, but it was tantalizing in its promise.

JESSE DIDN'T COME. Her first date, and she had been stood up. So this was the way atheists viewed their obligations, she fumed.

Then at nine o'clock the phone rang.

"I'm sorry," said Jesse.

She stared at the yellow kitchen wall to which the phone was attached, hoping that the daffodil color would soothe her bruised. bristling nerves and keep her from letting Jesse know how hurt and angry she was.

"I'm sorry about our date," he said. "I'm calling from Yale-New Haven Hospital. I was in an auto ac-

cident."

Robin felt deluged with remorse. An accident! If ever a man had a valid excuse to break a date... "Are you all right?" she asked, frantic.

"I'm fine. The doctors looked me over and released me. I'm free to

leave."

"Stay put," she ordered him. "I'll be right there." Before he could dispute her, she hung up.

IT TOOK HER twenty minutes to reach the hospital. His hair was rumpled, his jacket creased. A large bluish welt marked his cheekbone below his left eye, and his lower lip looked puffy. The front of his shirt bore a splotch of dried blood.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured, closing the distance between them.

He shrugged and reached for his attaché case. His actions were slow and deliberate, Robin noticed, and his left wrist was taped.

"Your arm?" she asked.

"A slight sprain," he told her as he slid some papers into his briefcase and snapped it shut. Then he stood and slipped on his coat, moving woodenly. "From fighting the steering wheel."

His limber legs carried him cautiously to her side, reminding her of the stiff way her mother sometimes moved when her arthritis acted up.

"This place is beginning to get to me."

Nodding, Robin accompanied him outdoors. She unlocked the passenger door of her station wagon, and Jesse gingerly lowered himself onto the seat. She dashed around the car to the driver's side and climbed in. They merged with the traffic on the turnpike.

"What happened?"

He sank into the seat. "Some clown was tailgating me," he told her. "When I slowed down at a curve, he rear-ended me, and that put me into a spin. If it weren't for a strategically placed electrical pole, I'd probably still be spinning."

Robin shuddered. "It's a miracle

you weren't hurt worse."

His eyes still closed, he issued a dry laugh. "I was saved by my seat belt."

Of course. Atheists didn't believe in miracles.

Jesse directed her to turn left, and at the bottom of a hill they entered his condominium complex. "That's my house," he said, pointing to a spacious-looking town house at the bottom of a rolling grassy hill, and then to a staircase leading down the hill from the road. "Park anywhere near the stairs."

Robin shut off the engine. "I'm walking you to the door," she announced.

"Yes, ma'am."

He led her along a winding walk to his front porch, which was protected from the sudden rain by an overhang. He offered a lopsided smile, then cupped his hands over her shoulders. "Thank you," he whispered. His gaze seemed to impale her.

His mouth descended to hers, moving with surprising force against hers, his arms winding tightly around her. His tongue thrust past her teeth and deep into her mouth, filling it, consuming, shocking her with the sudden throbbing desire it aroused within her.

When he finally drew back, he was gasping for breath. "Oh, Robin...Robin." He cradled her head against him, combing his trembling fingers through her hair. "I want to ask you in," he whispered. "But I can't."

"I know," she murmured.

"Can I see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," she echoed, scrambling to resurrect her sanity. "I've got to be at Woodleigh's till three, and I promised Phil I'd take him to the Milford Mall afterward to do some Christmas shopping."

"I could come with you."

"Christmas shopping?" The familiar sound of her own laughter relaxed her. "Do you really want to go to a holiday-infested mall?" she questioned him. "With Philip?"

"I want..." He sighed, his fingers raveling through her hair again. "I want to be with you. It doesn't

matter where."

The extravagance of his claim disconcerted her. She understood that he hadn't said it simply to compliment her. It had been an expression of need. "Come by around three-thirty," she said. "We'll be ready to storm the mall by then."

He nodded slightly, then bowed and touched his lips to hers one last time. Then he released her, unlocked the front door and stepped inside. "Tomorrow," he murmured. He remained in the open doorway, watching until she returned to her car.

THE BRUISE was still visible below his eye, but it had faded from a vivid purple to a subdued grayish-blue.

"How are you feeling?" Robin asked Jesse once Philip's chatter had subsided in the back seat of the car.

"Pretty good. I wound up spending most of the morning working."

"Really? On a Saturday?"

He shrugged. "It's an impossible case, actually. One of my clients found out that her son, who's in the

Navy, had his Christmas leave revoked. She's asked me to take on the Pentagon and get him home for the holiday."

Robin groaned. She was naturally interested in tales about the hassles the armed forces regularly visited upon its personnel. How many times had a transfer date been changed, so that her father had to ship off weeks ahead of Robin and her mother, stranding them to pack everything and empty the house without him? "Don't tell me the Navy's as bad as the Army about these things. How come they revoked the kid's leave?"

"There was a violent incident on his ship," Jesse related. "Some sort of gang rivalry. A small fire was set, and a few seamen were injured. Once they dock in Newport, the whole crew is being held for questioning. My client is so heartbroken about it, I promised her I'd make some inquiries."

"Of course she's heartbroken," Robin concurred. "If I couldn't have Philip with me for Christmas... what point would there be in celebrating the holiday?"

"I don't know," Jesse answered slowly. "I'm not sure there is a point, even in the best of circumstances."

Robin grimaced.

The parking lot outside the mall was crammed with cars. As she trekked to the nearest entrance with Jesse and Philip, she cringed at the comprehension of how crowded the mall would be. Her expectations were borne out. Massive swarms of shoppers milled around the mall's

interior, blocking the store entrances and promenades.

At the center of the mall, across the fountain from an enormous spruce tree dripping with electric lights and painted balls, a fenced-off area covered with fake snow housed a cute little red-and-green hut bearing a sign reading Santa's Workshop.

"Santa Claus!" Philip shrieked, racing to the fence and gawking at the bearded, pot-bellied character. "Can I talk to Santa Claus before we go shopping?"

"It's a very long line," Robin pointed out. "Maybe later, when everybody goes home for dinner—"

"I'll wait in line with him," Jesse declared. "Why don't you take care of your shopping?"

Robin hesitated.

"Better yet," he recommended, "why don't we arrange to meet somewhere." He surveyed the noisy, teeming surroundings. "The entrance to the steak house," he decided. "By five-thirty we'll be ready for dinner."

Robin wavered. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

He gazed down at her, his eyes dark and constant.

Robin laughed. "Well, if you insist." She kissed Philip's cheek and slipped away.

THE CROWDS had thinned slightly with the arrival of dinnertime, and she had little difficulty locating Jesse and Philip near the entrance to the steak house.

Jesse was smiling. "Can I interest you in some food? We menfolk are starving."

They entered the steak house. The restaurant was doing a brisk business, but they didn't have to wait long for a table. Jesse and Robin ordered steaks, Philip had a hamburger. He scrutinized his mother while they waited for their food. "Did you get lots of stuff?" he asked. "You didn't get me clothes, did you?"

Robin laughed. "I'm leaving that for your grandmothers. And don't worry—I've already sent them both linens from Woodleigh's. With your name on the cards."

Philip's relief was palpable. He twisted to Jesse. "Mom takes care of everything," he boasted. Then he turned back to Robin. "So, listen, Mom," Philip ventured. Their food had arrived, and he was drowning his hamburger in ketchup. "I think we ought to get our tree tomorrow."

"Philip, we've already discussed this. It's too soon to get a tree. All we'll have by Christmas morning is a carpet full of brown needles."

"Not if we water it a lot," Philip maintained. Then he glanced at Jesse, seeking an ally. "Tell her, Jesse. Tell her we should get a tree tomorrow."

"You should get a tree tomorrow," Jesse obliged.

Robin's eyes widened. "Get serious," she chided him.

"I am serious," he insisted, carving his steak. "It won't dry out if you keep it watered."

"Jesse. I thought you didn't... well..."

"It's for Phil, not for me," Jesse reminded her.

Phil. Apparently things had gone quite amicably between her son and Jesse, if Philip had given him permission to call him by that name.

Robin laughed. Philip had obviously worked a miracle on Jesse to get him excited about a Christmas tree, of all things.

IT WAS ONE thing for Jesse to argue that Robin ought to buy a Christmas tree. It was another for him to insist on accompanying Philip and her when they went to get it and to help them bring it home.

Philip eagerly played the boss man as the two adults set up the tree in the living room, commanding Robin to tilt the trunk slightly forward, slightly to the left, slightly back again, while Jesse tightened the screws around the base. Once they were all in agreement that the tree was perfectly straight, they untied the limbs.

"Wow!" Philip whooped, darting to the den. "Let's get the decorations."

To her astonishment, Jesse pulled off his jacket. Robin eyed him speculatively. Did he intend to help hang the decorations? And why was he trailing Philip into the den to fetch the boxes? "I'm going to like yours," he had said when Philip had grilled him on the tree shopping expedition about why he wasn't going to have his own tree. "I bet it's going to be the best tree in the whole world." Perhaps, she mused as she hung the strewn jackets in the coat

closet, decorating a tree didn't necessarily offend an atheist's sensibilities, as long as it was someone else's tree.

Jesse emerged from the den with a carton cradled in his arms and Philip at his heels. Jesse set the carton down near the tree with a thud and straightened up.

She gazed into his eyes; their powerful radiance offered her no hint of his thoughts. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to," she told him quietly.

"I know that," he responded. Then he gave her a reassuring grin, squatted down next to Philip, and helped him unload the decorations.

It took the three of them nearly two hours to adorn the tree. There were strings of lights, garlands of tinsel, reflecting balls, and all the individual ornaments, each with a story attached to it. Philip took it upon himself to fill Jesse in on their significance. "This little stocking, my Grandma Greer sewed it. See this little teddy bear? I got this when I was a baby."

Jesse laughed. "How about this silver bell, Phil?" he asked, dangling another ornament in front of the boy's eyes.

"That's the 'Jingle Bell,'" Philip informed him. "Mom found it in the street a few days after Christmas one year. It fell off Santa's sleigh, right?"

"That was my guess," Robin said, offering Jesse a sheepish smile. But if Jesse condemned her for feeding Philip malarkey about St. Nick, he didn't show it.

By one-thirty, the tree was embellished with every item from the cartons. The lighting of the tree instilled a feeling of rebirth deep within her, a blossoming in her soul, softly glowing and magical. If only Jesse could feel it, too, if only he could allow himself to know the wonder of it...

"I'm starving," Philip declared, shattering her brief reverie. "I want lunch, Mom."

"Lunch. Of course." Forcing herself back to reality, Robin glanced at Jesse. "Would you like lunch, too?"

"I'd like dinner," he answered, leaning against the counter next to where she was working. "Just you and me. Tonight."

The boy immediately piped up. "Yeah, Jesse—you owe her one, after standing her up Friday night."

"Philip!" Robin's cheeks burned with embarrassment.

HE DROVE to a Mexican restaurant on the eastern end of town. After hurrying inside to escape the evening chill, they were seated at a cozy, candlelit booth.

A waitress approached their table and asked if they wanted drinks.

"Have you got any wine?" Jesse asked the waitress.

Robin's jaw dropped. Wine? With tacos and enchiladas? "I think beer might go better with this food," she suggested.

"I hate beer," Jesse declared.

Her astonishment increased. "I think I'll pass," she said prudently.

Nodding, Jesse accepted two menus from the waitress.

"I don't think I've ever met a man who hated beer."

"Then I'm your first," Jesse said, unperturbed. "I tried beer in law school. Not only did it taste awful, but it gave me a whopping headache."

"Law school?" she blurted out. "What did you drink in college?"

"Nothing. I've already told you my parents are very religious. They raised me to think consuming liquor was a sin."

The waitress returned to take their orders. Once they were alone again, Robin regarded the puzzling man seated across the table from her. "I just can't picture you as devoutly religious," she commented.

He chuckled. "I'm not sure I ever was. I always had too many questions. There's no room for questions if you're buying into fundamentalism, Robin. You either accept it or reject it. You swallow all of it or none of it."

"And you couldn't swallow it."

"I tried," he admitted, his smile expanding. "But I kept choking on it."

She had to learn more about him. She had to make sense of him. "How did you wind up in Branford?" she inquired. "Were you doing legal aid work in Los Angeles?"

He shook his head. "Far from it, Robin. I was raking in the bucks working for a big company."

"What company did you work for?"

"G.C.E." At her bemused stare, he clarified. "Grace Cathedral Enterprises."

"Grace Cathedral? You mean, that big chapel on television, with

the Reverend Robert Shepherd and his famous choir?"

Jesse appeared irritated. "Don't tell me you watch Blessings at Noon, Robin."

"I don't," she swore, surprised by the stinging bitterness in his words. "But everybody's caught a few minutes of Shepherd's shows at least once in their lives. What's Shepherd really like?"

Jesse toyed with his fork. "He's an actor, just like any other TV performer. His concerns are the same—ratings, popularity, audience."

"What do all those holy people need a lawyer for?" she asked.

Jesse let out a caustic laugh. "Money, Robin. Contributions. Distribution rights, royalties, commercials. Money. To oversee contracts, to avoid lawsuits."

"Why on earth did you ever take a job like that?"

Jesse ruminated for a while. "Let's just say it was part of my upbringing," he answered vaguely.

Robin leaned back and examined the man facing her. "But still..." She tried to unravel her snarled thoughts. "For someone who choked on religion and rejected it, how come you got into our Christmas tree in such a big way today? And the shopping trip yesterday, and the visit with Santa Claus..."

"That has nothing to do with religion," he argued. "Visiting Santa made Phil happy, and keeping him entertained while you shopped made you happy. And the tree..." He hesitated, a wistful smile curving his lips. "The tree was beautiful because it means so much to you both."

It was fun. And after what happened Friday night, all I wanted was to enjoy life, to have fun."

That hadn't been all Jesse had wanted. Particularly not on Friday night. Jesse had wanted more from Robin, more than he was able to ask for. They both knew that.

He regarded her for a long, contemplative minute. "When I was in that accident," he murmured, "it wasn't just the seat belt that saved my life." He paused, his gaze holding hers, uncompromising. "You saved my life, too."

"Me?" she sputtered. "All I did was pick you up at the hospital."

His thumb moved against her wrist, tracing the bones, dancing across her throbbing pulse. "I kept thinking of you throughout the accident, clinging to thoughts of you. And that's what pulled me through. My guardian angel...you. I'm convinced of it."

Stunned, Robin fell back in her seat.

"You look scared," Jesse observed, withdrawing his hand and studying her, concerned.

"I don't think I am." Robin emitted a small, breathless laugh. "What I do think is that you're just too stuck on being an atheist to admit that it wasn't me who pulled you through. It was the Lord, watching over you."

"I think I know the difference between a beautiful blond woman and a bearded old geezer in the clouds."

"Your idea of God is ridiculous," Robin retorted, laughing.

Jesse joined her laughter. "That's probably why I don't believe in Him."

SHE TUGGED open the mesh curtain protecting the hearth, balled up a few sheets of newspaper, piled on some kindling and applied a lit match to her construction. It caught instantly, lending the room a cozy warmth.

"You read my mind," Jesse said.

She found him standing less than a foot behind her. He dropped onto the carpeted floor beside Robin and extended his hands forward to catch the fire's warmth.

She still harbored many questions about Jesse. "There has to be more to it," she pondered, surprised to hear herself giving voice to her bemusement.

Jesse eyed her, perplexed. "More to what?"

She laughed meekly and turned to stare at the fire. "Your decision to move to New Haven. It couldn't have just been the job."

She could feel his eyes upon her. He lapsed into thought for a moment, then said, "Do you want to know if I left a woman behind? I did."

"You came here to recover from a broken heart?" she asked, then felt her cheeks darken with color at her relentless prying.

He touched her shoulder. "I didn't have a broken heart, Robin. Just like you and your ex-husband, we grew apart."

"Were you married?" she asked. He shook his head. "Anne and I were pretty serious, but it didn't get that far. She was one of the producers of *Blessings at Noon*. We were together, on and off, for about four years. But she bought into the whole scene and I didn't, and finally we were forced to admit that the differences between us were irreconcilable." He paused, then angled his face to view her. "What's the matter, Robin? You wish I hadn't brought it up, don't you?"

"It isn't that," she said quickly. "It's just... I can't help wondering what you're doing here with me when you could be with some glamorous lady who produces television shows."

He gazed steadily at her, neither smiling nor frowning, simply looking, absorbing her with his eyes. "You know what I'm doing here with you," he said.

He was with her, she reminded herself, because he thought she had saved his life. Deep in her heart, she wanted to believe that, however inadvertently, she had helped him to survive the crash.

She sensed in his attitude not the overpowering need that had compelled him to kiss her the last time they were alone, but rather a strong, healthy attraction, a masculine hunger, controlled but very real, very present.

He ran his thumb gently over her lower lip, tracing the full curve of it. His tongue traced the line his thumb had sketched over her lips.

"You didn't wait until law school to learn how to kiss did you?"

A soft laugh bubbled up from his chest as his lips covered hers. His kiss deepened, and her arms curled around his shoulders as he bowed to her, urging her down onto the carpet beneath him, his hips settling provocatively between her thighs. She reflexively arched her back, pressing her breasts into the walls of rib and muscle, and he groaned. The heat roaring through her flesh and gathering below her abdomen had nothing to do with the fire in the hearth.

Her arms moved down to ring his waist. Through his shirt, she explored the sleek, firm muscles of his lower back, the tension in them as his hips shifted above hers again. She felt his arousal, hard and unyielding as he moved against her, urging her legs to accommodate him.

"Where's your bed?" he whispered, his lips grazing her hair.

Upstairs, her soul cried out in a silent answer. Take him upstairs. Yet the words wouldn't come. Jesse nudged her face back to his. He peered down at her, his eyes smoky, his lips parted as he struggled with his erratic breath. "Tell me, Robin," he prompted her, sensing her confusion.

"I'm not..." She swallowed, then forced herself to speak. "I'm not sure that I love you, Jesse. Not yet. And if I don't love you... we can't. I know that must sound ridiculously outdated, or infantile, or—"

He cut off the spate of words with a brush of his fingertips over her trembling lips. He rose to a sitting position, his aroused body obviously reluctant to give hers up, and that helped her to sit as well.

"Are you angry?" she asked timidly.

"Angry?" He looped his arm around her shoulders and cuddled her to him, then planted a kiss on the crown of her head. "No, I'm not angry. I think you're a very wise woman," he said. "If you want to know the truth, Robin... I want your love as much as I want you."

Love was more than being wanted, she reflected. For her, at least, it took time, commitment, knowledge and understanding. As she nestled into his shoulder and shared the fire's beauty and warmth with him, she admitted that she didn't yet know everything she had to know about him, but in time, she vowed, she would.

What was she thinking? How could she treat the man so shabbily? Sunday night, she'd pushed him away after blatantly encouraging him to seduce her, and early today she'd declared that she was all but unavailable to see him for the next century. If he had any brains, he'd wash his hands of her.

The truth was, she didn't have time for him, not now, not during the most important month for business at Woodleigh's. She didn't have time to build a friendship with a man when she scarcely had time for her own son. Whatever free moments she had belonged to Philip.

All right, so she had needs. Big deal. Ever since she'd made a conscious decision to become a mother, she had voluntarily put her own needs on hold. Philip's needs came first. Right now, he needed his mother, his home, a magnificent

Christmas. And that took precedence over anything Robin might want to discover with a man.

But any woman whose priorities had Christmas with her little boy coming before a love affair couldn't hope to hold an atheist's interest for long.

Just as Robin shut off the bedroom light the telephone rang. She answered it at once, hoping the bell hadn't roused Philip. "Hello?"

"Hi, Robin." It was Jesse. "I gave the Navy a lecture on Santa Claus today," he announced.

"What?"

"I told you about my client whose son is in the Navy, didn't I?"

"Something about how the Navy was denying him his Christmas leave," she recalled.

"That's right. I called up a captain stationed at Newport today and told him that if the Navy believed in Santa Claus, they had to let the boy go home for Christmas."

"You didn't!"

"I did, Robin, and I think it's your fault. What do you think, Robin? If I send them an affidavit on the existence of Santa, are they going to blackmail me with it?"

"I wouldn't lose sleep over it." She tucked the receiver more firmly against her chin. He was presenting himself as a kindred soul with whom she could share a few thoughts at the end of her day. An unexpected sense of well-being flooded her, a warmth and contentment she hadn't experienced in years. "I'm close, Jesse," she admitted, startling herself.

"Close to what?" he asked, bewildered. "Close to loving you."

He said nothing for a moment. And then, "I'm glad, Robin. Very glad."

HE CALLED again Tuesday evening. Robin and Philip were in the kitchen, Philip pasting together a chain composed of red and green construction paper links, and Robin arranging flexible sprigs of pine around the bases of the red candles she planned to display in the living room and dining room windows.

She was delighted to hear his voice on the other end. "Hello, Jesse," she greeted him.

"Are you free Saturday?"

"Yes and no," she answered. "The problem is, I've got to work until five on Saturday, and from noon to five Sunday."

"That still leaves Saturday eve-

ning," Jesse noted.

Robin knew that she would be exhausted after a full day at the store on a Saturday. She also knew that she would want to spend the evening with Philip. But that didn't mean she had to deprive herself of Jesse's company, too. "Maybe you could come over for dinner," she said. "I won't be able to prepare anything too elegant, but—"

"Better yet, why don't you and Phil come here for dinner?" Jesse offered. "If he likes spaghetti and meatballs, he's my kind of guest."

"Spaghetti and meatballs is one of his favorites."

"Great. Come over whenever you're ready after work."

JESSE'S condominium was big, Robin could say that much for it. A swanky-looking leather couch stood against one wall, a rocking chair, a table and a lamp against another. And that was it. No pictures, no plants, no knickknacks or clutter. Not a single personal touch. There wasn't a stick of furniture in the dining room, not a table, not a chair, not a sideboard.

"Oh, wow!" Philip hooted, noticing the three neatly arranged place settings on the breakfast bar in the kitchen. "Are we gonna be eating here? It's almost like a restaurant, Mom!"

She laughed sheepishly. "That gives you an idea of the quality of the restaurants I take Philip to."

"Well," Jesse addressed the boy, "we're eating at the counter because I haven't bought a dining table yet." He filled a pot with water.

"Can I help?" Robin asked.

Jesse shook his head. "The meatballs and sauce are already made, and so's the salad. All that's left is cooking the spaghetti."

"What's for dessert?" Philip

asked.

"Ice cream," Jesse told him.

"All right!" Philip flopped onto one of the stools, discovered that the seat revolved, and busied himself with spinning in dizzying circles.

Robin scanned the vacant dining room. "Why haven't you bought a dining table yet?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound disapproving. "I can't imagine living in a place for six months and not settling in. My family spent only five months on a base in Wyoming, and you wouldn't

believe how lived-in my mother made that house."

"It's obviously a knack you've inherited," Jesse praised her, stirring the spaghetti vigorously. "You know how to make a house a home."

"Because it's important," she asserted, then stifled herself. She wasn't going to torment Jesse with yet another sermon on her feelings about the necessity of having a real home.

Jesse served the meal, and Philip's behavior at dinner was exemplary. He even ate half his salad, along with plenty of spaghetti. After dinner, he wolfed down a generous portion of ice cream, and Robin didn't object when Jesse led him downstairs to watch television in the den.

Once the pots were scrubbed and the counter wiped, Jesse refilled their glasses with wine and led her into the living room. No sooner were they seated on the couch when Philip appeared at the top of the stairs to ask, "This guy on the news said something about Koala Lumpy. Where's that, Mom?"

"Koala Lumpy?" she asked. "You mean Kuala Lumpur. It's a city in Malaysia."

"Malaysia," Philip repeated. "That's in Asia. They rhyme, Jesse. Malaysia, Asia." With that astute observation, he disappeared down the stairs again.

"He's amazing," Jesse commented, staring at the staircase. "You've got yourself an incredible little boy." "Any little boy could figure out that Malaysia rhymed with Asia," Robin argued.

"If I had ever asked my parents about Kuala Lumpur, they would have treated me to a ten-minute lecture on the good works of the missionaries in Malaysia. And they would have told me to spend more time studying the scripture and less time asking so many questions."

"Then you're the amazing one," Robin observed. "You turned out pretty well, under the circumstances."

Jesse chuckled and drew Robin closer, cushioning her head against his shoulder. "Phil's turning out better," he said. "You're lucky to have a son like him. Or maybe he's the lucky one, having a mother like you."

If Robin challenged Jesse, he would swear that he didn't believe in luck. So she simply accepted his observation, letting its truth settle comfortably inside her heart.

BUT IF ONE believed in luck, one had to believe in bad luck as well as good. When Robin's phone rang early Sunday morning, she expected to hear Jesse's voice on the other end.

The voice she heard in response to her drowsy hello wasn't Jesse's, however. Cutting through the static in the long-distance connection, she heard her ex-husband say, "Robin? It's Ray. I'm going to be stateside in Orlando for Christmas, and I want Philip with me." PERHAPS ten o'clock on a Sunday morning was too early to call Jesse, but he sounded reasonably awake when he answered; Robin found solace in that. "Hello, Jesse—it's Robin, and I..." A fresh lump of tears took up residence in her throat, and she was unable to continue.

"What happened?" he asked, worried.

She related the details of Ray's call to Jesse. "Any other time of the year I wouldn't have minded. But Christmas—what am I going to do?" she asked, desperate for a straw to grasp at.

"You'll stay here," he said. "And I'll be here, and we'll make the best of it."

The tension in her gut slowly ebbed, replaced by a shimmering warmth. Christmas with Jesse. Christmas with a man she was only beginning to know, a man who rejected so many of the things she believed in, a man who claimed he had no soul. Christmas with a friend. "You'll celebrate with me?" she asked timidly.

"I'll do my best," he said. "But I'm not going to strap on a false beard and climb down your chimney."

For the first time since Ray's call, a smile teased her lips. It wasn't much of a smile, rather feeble and forlorn, but if Jesse was willing to do his best, she would have to do her best, too.

IT WAS RAINING when Robin took Philip to the airport. The temperature hovered in the mid-thirties, so Robin wasn't worried about the possibility of ice on the runway.

Nor was she worried about Jesse's having to contend with foul weather during his drive to Newport. He had phoned her last night to inform her that the Navy had finally agreed to release Gerald Selby into Jesse's custody on a two-day pass. Selby would have to be back on base by Christmas night. Jesse had gotten the United States Navy to come around. And he didn't believe in miracles?

Obtaining a ticket to Florida for Philip at this time of year, on such short notice, was yet more proof that miracles did happen. But this was one miracle Robin would gladly have done without.

For all she knew, Philip's departure today might be the start of a brand-new Greer Christmas tradition...but that thought was too horrible to dwell on.

Eventually, Philip and the other unescorted children were beckoned to board the plane. Doing an estimable job of hiding her depression, Robin kissed him goodbye. It pained her to watch him vanish down the connector to the jet.

HER HOUSE seemed unnaturally dark and still that night. No exuberant welcome from Philip, no longwinded description of schoolwork and snakes' diets, no pleading for sweets. It was like stepping inside a mausoleum, Robin thought with a wretched sigh.

She was not going to mope, she was not going to sulk. She was not going to wallow in self-pity. Jesse was coming. She wouldn't have to face Christmas all by herself.

She hurried to the living room and plugged in the tree lights. Then she lit the red candles in the windows. This was the way Christmas was supposed to be, she reminded herself, striding to the den and turning on the television. She through the channels, stopping at the first Christmas music she came to. The screen featured a huge choir robed in blue and standing in a horseshoe formation, singing "Joy to the World" in a cappella magnificence. "Perfect," Robin rejoiced, turning up the volume.

She barely had time to brush her hair before the doorbell rang. Racing from the bathroom, she swung the front door open.

His arms cradled a steaming white box from which rose the spicy aroma of pizza. She flung her arms around him, nearly knocking the pizza out of his hands, and drew him inside. "I'm so glad you're here," she murmured, planting a friendly kiss on his lips. "How was Newport?"

"Ridiculous," he told her, hanging his coat in the closet. "It was as complicated as a bail hearing just trying to get the kid released. But I did it." He took the pizza back from her and started toward the kitchen. He tilted his head and frowned, listening. His frown deepening, he spun around to the den. As soon as

he saw the television screen he froze, then cursed. "You're not watching this, are you?"

"I'm listening to the choir," she clarified. "Their singing is absolutely gorgeous."

"This is the Grace Cathedral annual Christmas special," Jesse said tautly, not at all moved by the spellbinding music. "Turn it off."

She caught herself before blurting out that she absolutely wouldn't turn it off. Perhaps the show had been produced by Jesse's former girl-friend; perhaps his sudden grimness was a result of some old heartache not yet healed.

She started toward the television, but before she reached the on-off button, the choir came to the final cadence of the song and was replaced on the screen by the Reverend Robert Shepherd. Robin hesitated. Something about the minister's voice, about his towering height, his proud bearing, the piercing darkness of his dazzling, thickly lashed eyes...

"As you know," Shepherd intoned, "Christmas is a time of giving...."

"Turn it off," Jesse said softly.

His plea for money became a bit heavy-handed, sure. But it wasn't what he said that so unnerved Robin. It was how he'd said it, how he'd sounded, how his dazzling, thickly lashed eyes reached out to her...

She glanced at Jesse, inexplicably fearful of what she would see. He was staring not at the television but at her. Reaching out to her with those same dazzling, thickly lashed eyes.

"Well," he said in his distinctive voice, a voice uncannily like Shepherd's. "Now you know. The Reverend Robert Shepherd is my father."

"Your father!"

"He legally changed his name to Shepherd when he took the job with Grace Cathedral." He stared at her for a minute. "The pizza's getting cold."

"Then we'll eat and you'll tell me," Robin resolved, then turned off the TV and left the den for the kitchen. She gathered plates, glasses, napkins and a bottle of cola and set the kitchen table. Jesse pulled two wedges of pizza from the box, distributed them, and sat across from Robin.

"I'm waiting," she reminded him as he swallowed a mouthful of pizza and reached for his soda.

He drank, then lowered his glass. "When he first took the job, they broadcasted a half-hour show on an independent station every Sunday morning, but they were thinking of expanding. My father raised the money to build that monstrous cathedral. He gave Grace clout. He gave its broadcast the ratings to go national. My father's an emcee, an entertainer and a businessman rolled into one."

"He's also a minister," Robin commented, nibbling on her pizza.

"Once my sister was gone, what little faith I had was gone as well. My father threw himself even more energetically into denouncing sinners and raising money for the cathedral, and my mother—well, she turned our home into a domestic cathedral,

with prayer corners and iron-clad rules."

"And you became a lawyer for your father's church," Robin remarked.

Jesse nodded. He tossed a crescent of crust onto his plate and shifted in his chair. "When I was in college," he continued, "we had some ferocious debates about the Vietnam war. I kept asking my father why he wasn't preaching more sermons on peace. He kept telling me that he was doing his part by praying for the lives of our boys overseas. By the time I told him I was going to law school instead of divinity school, he had all but given up on me."

"But after all that, you still went to work for him."

Jesse reached for his glass of soda and settled in his chair. "He was my father, and that was the way things were done." He smiled pensively, his eyes momentarily losing focus, growing distant. "And then Anne Cotter was hired on as a producer, straight from a stint producing game shows, and we started seeing each other. The affair was all right with my father, too. Anne was a solid employee. The fact that we weren't married bothered Dad, but he rationalized it by saying that, since we were both doing such indispensable work for G.C.E., God would forgive us our sins. Anne viewed things that way, too. I seemed to be the only person who didn't."

"You wanted to marry her?"

"I... I wanted to live a consistent life," Jesse explained. "I'm glad I didn't marry her. It would have been a lousy marriage. My interpretation of right and wrong differed from Anne's, from my parents' and from everyone else's at Grace. When I told my father I wanted to take a sabbatical from G.C.E. and work with the poor, he fell into a rage. So did Anne." He exhaled and smiled wryly. "At that point, it occurred to me that the indigent might need me even more than God did."

"So you quit God and signed up with New Haven Legal Assistance," Robin summarized. It sounded stark when she put it like that, but she couldn't rationalize his actions any other way. "Jesse, it seems as if you rejected God only because it was a way of rejecting your father."

Jesse grunted a laugh. "Maybe. But when the man you're trying to cut your ties with claims to have a direct line to God, it makes the cut a great deal more complicated."

Robin reached for Jesse's hand. "It only saddens me to think that after all this, you're left with so little. You haven't got your family and you haven't got any faith, either."

"I have myself," Jesse noted, his tone subdued. "In the end, that's all any of us ever has."

She felt a sudden burst of warmth inside her. "We have more than ourselves, Jesse," she whispered. "We have each other."

An unspoken communication passed between them, a tacit understanding of what existed between them. Jesse stood, circled the table and pulled Robin to her feet. His lips covered hers and coaxed them apart. For an immeasurable instant Robin's identity seemed to blur with

Jesse's in the heat of their kiss. When Jesse drew back, his eyes bright and clear, Robin led him to the stairs and up to her bedroom. "Are you sure about this, Robin?" he asked.

She peered up at him. "Yes," she swore, convinced that she had never been more sure of anything in her life. She loved Jesse.

His mouth found hers again, moving possessively. His arms surrounded her. "Do you know how much I want you?" he whispered hoarsely, sliding his hand beneath the ribbed edge of her sweater to stroke the skin of her back.

"Not as much as I want you," she replied.

He undid the clasp of her bra, which followed her sweater onto the floor.

His fingers danced across her flesh with almost reverential sensitivity, exploring the warm valley between her breasts, teasing her nipples. He backed up to the bed, pulling her with him.

As soon as she was naked, he shed his own clothing. His lips nibbled the underside of her jaw, her throat, the arch of her collarbone. His fingers continued to roam down her leg, describing a circle around her kneecap and then rising along the inside of her thigh.

Their lips fused in a ravenous kiss. The sheer force of it left Robin shifting impatiently beneath Jesse, her body demanding to share in the intimacy her lips and tongue had experienced.

When he found her, every muscle in her body tensed reflexively, then melted into his caress. She moaned, surrendering to the fluid pulsing inside her body, the damp rush of hunger for him. Every nerve sparking crazily to vibrant life, every impulse centered on the need to absorb him, to deliver her soul to him.

His hips surged, pressing, invading, conquering. Her legs twined around his, resisting him every time he drew back. His pace increased, driving her to a pinnacle, pushing her to an instant of perfect unity with him. With a sigh, she surrendered to the deluge of throbbing sensation, the glorious pulses of completion rippling through her. Groaning, he sank into her arms. His heart thudded savagely against her breast, and his breath was shallow and ragged.

Eventually he propped himself up on his arms and gazed down at her. He tenderly brushed a few stray golden hairs from her cheeks. "Angel," he breathed, gathering her into a snug embrace. "I love you."

He loved her. Nothing else mattered.

NOTHING ELSE mattered, that is, until the next morning. She found herself stalking to Philip's bedroom. Right now Philip ought to be bouncing on the bed, smearing toothpaste all over the bathroom sink, hollering at Robin to shake a leg so she wouldn't be late for work, cheering about the impending arrival of Santa Claus.

Last night hadn't changed a thing. The day before Christmas had arrived, and Philip was gone. WOODLEIGH'S remained frenzied until five-thirty. Then, as if answering some silent command, the customers vanished, toting their purchases with them.

A tap at the door startled her, and she swore generally at all the idiots who left their Christmas shopping to the last minute. She turned toward the store's entry.

Jesse stood outside the door, his breath emerging as small white puffs of vapor in the evening cold.

She opened the door. "I've got an errand to run. I've got some food to deliver to my clients in New Haven. Would you like to come along for the ride?"

"Food?" she questioned. "Food baskets, you mean?"

"Food bags, actually. I stopped at the supermarket and picked up a few things I thought they could use for Christmas."

Robin's eyes narrowed on him. This man, this Grinch who thought Christmas was just one more day, had purchased Christmas gifts for his indigent clients. What a phony he was! Blustering about his lack of faith, his rejection of God and religion—and here he was, the personification of Santa Claus himself!

Jesse met her quizzical gaze and smiled sheepishly.

"Let me get my coat," Robin said, humming "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" to herself.

It wasn't until they were in New Haven, though, that she wondered what had happened to her melancholia.

Jesse finally coasted to a halt in front of a rundown, four-story building with a few cracked and boarded windows gracing its front wall.

To her surprise, Jesse seemed inordinately pleased by the sight of the place. "They collected the garbage!" he shouted, swinging open his door. "It's about time!"

"You mean, it could have been worse?"

"It has been worse," Jesse said. They walked together to the back of the car, opened the hatchback and pulled out the bags. "I wonder what prompted Cabot to pay for the garbage removal. He's the landlord—the guy we're suing."

The Christmas spirit, Robin contemplated as she followed him inside the grim apartment building.

When they reached the third-floor hallway, Jesse stopped and gaped at the light bulb glowing in the ceiling. "What?"

Not bothering to answer, Jesse knocked on one of the doors. It swung open to reveal a strapping young man in jeans, his hair cropped short. "Mr. Lawson! Come on in."

A gray-haired woman rose from a chair at Jesse's and Robin's entrance. "Mr. Lawson!" she cried frantically. "You haven't come to take Gerald back, have you?"

"No, he's got until tomorrow, Mrs. Selby," Jesse reassured her, extending the bags to her as the teenagers in the room hung back shyly. "We just dropped by to bring you this."

"Oh, my God," Mrs. Selby gasped, staring at the food. "I don't know what to say. I praise God you came into our lives." Mrs. Selby dropped onto a chair, stunned. "You are too good to us," she said, sighing. "I thought all my prayers were answered when you brought Gerald home yesterday. And then that man came and fixed the light in the hall this morning. And now this... I just don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," Jesse suggested, patting her arm. "We're on our way."

Robin's gaze passed from the grayhaired woman to Gerald and back again. Mrs. Selby had her son home with her for the holiday, and Robin hadn't. Yet she felt no envy. Her eyes met Mrs. Selby's. "Merry Christmas," she said softly.

"Bless you," Mrs. Selby murmured.

The climb downstairs passed in silence. By the time Jesse and Robin reached the car, she was weeping. "What's this all about?" he asked, drawing her against himself. "You aren't crying because Mrs. Selby has her son and you don't have yours, are you?"

"No." She tightened her arms around him, hugging him close. "I really love you." She kissed him. "And I was crying because, after all these years, it took an avowed atheist to teach me what Christmas is all about."

"That makes perfect sense," Jesse commented, smiling whimsically.

"We atheists have the objectivity you Santa worshippers are lacking."

"Take me home," she murmured. "We'll build a big fire in the fireplace, and we'll light up the tree, and—" her smile matched his in mischief "—I'll make a believer out of you."

"I already believe," he murmured before covering her lips in a

searing kiss.

She held him close, strengthened by her faith that they were a part of something bigger than themselves. Maybe it was God, maybe love, maybe the power of two souls coming together.

Whatever it was, Robin would be-

lieve in it forever.

SHE WAS awakened by the ringing of her telephone. Groaning, she rolled out of Jesse's arms and groped for the receiver on the night table beside her bed. "Hello?"

"Hey, Mom! It's me!" Philip said gleefully. "Merry Christmas!"

"Philip!" Robin blinked awake and grinned. "Merry Christmas, Phil. Are you having a good time?"

"Yeah, it's been great. Yesterday we went to see this show at a place called Sea World, and they had a whale that danced in the water. Tomorrow Dad's going to take me to Disney World."

"It sounds terrific," Robin said earnestly. "I'm so glad you're enjoying it."

"Are you going to see Jesse today?"

Robin turned to find Jesse awake. His smile cut dimples into his cheeks,

which were shadowed by an overnight growth of beard. "I'll definitely be seeing Jesse today," she confirmed, winking at the man under discussion.

"Well, listen," Philip said, "when you see him, make sure he does what he promised me he'd do. And tell him Merry Christmas from me, too."

"I will."

"I love you, Mom," Philip said. "I'm gonna go now. Dad said I could have pancakes. Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, Phil. I love you, too." Robin sensed that her son had hung up before she finished speaking, but that didn't matter. Philip knew she loved him.

"How's he doing?" Jesse asked,

pushing himself up.

"Having the time of his life." Robin slid across the mattress to him, wrapped her arms around his waist and planted a kiss on his warm chest. "He said to wish you a merry Christmas. He also said that you promised to do something for him."

"I wonder what that's supposed to mean." Jesse frowned, but it looked like a fake frown to Robin. "It was sweet of him to take time out to wish

you a happy holiday.''

Robin leaned back from Jesse and examined his face. "All parents like to hear from their children at Christmas," Robin remarked quietly. "Why don't you call yours?" The idea clearly didn't appeal to Jesse. Robin bore down on him, her bright, hazel eyes piercing the guarded darkness of his. "Give of yourself, Jesse. Make them happy."

He met her stubborn gaze, then relented with a nod. "All right, I'll do it. They may just hang up on me—"

"They won't," Robin predicted.

"They'll chat for a few minutes, say goodbye and pray for my soul," he grumbled. Then he smiled grimly and pushed back the covers.

Robin didn't press him further. She knew he would phone his parents, and she was proud of him.

The first thing Greers always did on Christmas morning was to hurry downstairs and view the presents under the tree. This year, one of those presents would be for Jesse. Though she wasn't sure how, he would react, Robin couldn't wait to give it to him.

What she didn't expect was to find the tree all lit up. She was sure she had unplugged the lights last night. And there were two packages under the tree that she didn't recognize. With a bright red envelope lying on the carpet beside them.

Jesse offered a boyish grin. "This one is my gift to Phil," he said, dropping down on his knees and lifting the rectangular package. "It's a remote-control four-wheel-drive Jeep. When we were Christmas shopping at the mall, he threatened to buy one for Mrs. O'Leary. I figured it was something he wanted for himself."

"Oh, Jesse—he'll love it!" Every time she caught a glimpse of Jesse's generous soul—the soul he pretended he didn't have—she was amazed, nearly moved to tears.

"That one's for you, from Phil." Jesse pointed. "Phil asked me to smuggle it under the tree on Christmas morning." He presented Robin with the oddly shaped package.

"When did you bring it in here?" she asked, sitting beside Jesse and

gaping at him.

"While you were asleep. I had it hidden in my car." At her astonished stare, he elaborated. "As a matter of fact, when I went out to get it, I nearly got run over by some obese old guy in a funny red hat."

"Jesse!" Robin laughed and

poked him in the arm.

"Seriously," Jesse maintained, his expression deadpan. "I think the fellow was plastered—his nose was all red. And he was making a silly ho-ho-ho sound."

She tore the wrapping paper off Philip's gift to her and unveiled a bizarre humanoid object made of clay and painted orange. It featured disproportionately large ears, stiletto-shaped toes, wings and a halo fashioned out of wire.

"According to Phil, it's a boy from Gleek," Jesse told her.

"Of course," Robin said, chuckling at the grotesque statue. "I love it!" She lifted a small, neatly wrapped box. "This is for you, Jesse," she said, abruptly solemn.

Robin watched nervously as he unwrapped the box and raised the lid. Cushioned in a nest of tissue paper was the crystal angel she'd chosen for him. Jesse picked it up and raised it to the tree, gazing at the array of multicolored light reflected in its facets. He kissed her tenderly.

"I don't think you can begin to know how much it means to me."

"You called me an angel once," Robin reminded him.

"More than once," Jesse acknowledged. "I don't believe in angels—except for you." He scooped up the red envelope. "This is for you. I'm not sure if you'll like it, but..." He cut himself off and handed her the envelope.

She drew in a deep breath and pried open the flap. A slip of red paper fell out with the word me writ-

ten on it.

"If you'll have me," he said, his voice uncertain.

Her eyes sparkled playfully. Robin curled up in his lap, hugging him. "Let me warn you, it's one gift I'm never going to return."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He struck a dramatic pose. "Merry Christmas, Robin."

Robin's eyes sparkled mirthfully. "You didn't choke to death," she noted.

He cuddled her close to himself, folding his arms possessively around her and brushing his lips against the glistening golden tendrils crowning her head. "Thank God for that," he sighed.

Robin smiled and nestled deeper into his embrace. So Jesse Lawson had said "Merry Christmas" without choking, and he'd acknowledged God. And he'd given her the most wonderful gift in the universe.

Just a few more miracles to illuminate this miraculously fine morning.





NOREEN BROWNLIE 'Tis the Season



When Holly Peterson and Nick Petrovich both turn up as volunteer helpers over the holiday season for elderly Emmett Snow, confusion is at first the order of the day. Until Christmas works its magic.



have a confession to make."

The deep male voice was familiar, and Holly Peterson looked up from chopping celery to stare at her television screen. The voice belonged to a senior anchorman at one of Portland's stations.

"As a broadcaster," he continued, "I see a lot of stories about heroism, unselfish acts and volunteer work. This year I decided to do something myself." As the camera pulled back, the aging newsman was seen standing in front of a brightly lit Christmas tree. "I decided to become a link in the Chain of Caring."

It was only late October, but the scene tugged at Holly as the popular broadcaster sat down on a sofa beside a white-haired woman. "This is Alice," he said softly, taking a frail hand in his. "I've committed myself to helping her with errands and chores through the winter months." As he described the plight of many elderly shut-ins, the older woman's eyes glistened.

Holly felt tears spring to her own eyes. The tree, the fire, the white-haired woman—all were reminders her mother was gone. This would be Holly's first Christmas without a single family member.

A phone number appeared on the lower third of the screen, and Holly glanced at the clock. The salad she

was making for her lunch could wait. Besides, it was going to be a slow day at the salon. She dialed the number, but a recording asked her to wait.

"Volunteer Bureau, may I help you?"

She was jarred by the cheerful female voice. "Yes. My name is Holly Peterson, and I want to sign up for the Chain of Caring project. I saw the spot on TV."

"Wonderful. Let me explain how the project works." The coordinator emphasized the need for a fourmonth commitment to an "adoptee" and described the types of errands and chores usually requested.

"Now, Holly, can you tell me something about yourself?"

"I'm a cosmetologist. I like to cook. I took care of my mother while she was ill, so I have a little experience with bedside care and special diets."

"Do you enjoy celebrating Christmas?"

"I've always—" she hesitated "—spent Christmas with my mother, and she died last January. I'd love to have an old-fashioned celebration with my adoptee."

"Wonderful. Do you consider yourself a patient person, a good listener?"

Holly brightened. "I have to be," she replied with a laugh. "I listen to people's problems all day."

Holly asked a few questions of her own as the computer hummed for a moment at the other end.

"Perfect. I think I've got someone. It's only fair to be honest. We've had a hard time matching this one up. Your client is an elderly diabetic on oral medication. He needs companionship, and he can't stray far off his diet."

"And his name?" Holly asked.

"Snow, Mr. Emmett Snow,"

"I HAVE A confession to make."

Intrigued, Nick Petrovich came to rest in a sitting position on his rowing machine.

"Call to register with the Volunteer Bureau."

It was a nice thought, and he memorized the number, then returned to his vigorous rhythm on the machine.

"Damn!" Nick muttered. He knew what was eating at him. His parents had called from Chicago to tell him they had planned to visit the old country during the holidays. Their only child would have to spend Christmas without them, but the three of them would be together in spirit, they'd said.

In spirit? Nick snorted. He'd returned home to Chicago every year in the flesh since he was eighteen to celebrate Christmas. Once a year he embraced the old-world traditions and mingled with loud, demonstrative relatives. But not this year.

Adopting someone for four months would be personally fulfilling. He recalled the meager holiday celebrations of his youth—hard

times that were long over. He sent checks home every month and had money to spare. It could brighten some elderly shut-in's winter months. He wanted to share his blessings. And he didn't want to spend the holidays alone.

He dialed the Chain of Caring number.

"I'm new here, Mr. Petrovich, and a little slow on the computer," a young woman apologized. "Can you tell me something about yourself and your interests?"

"I'm an architect who writes programs for use in design, and I also work as a consultant. I enjoy teaching people, so I guess that makes me a rather patient person."

"Let me find the right commands here. Hmm. Petrovich. P-E-T— ahh—looks like I'm coming up with a match. This is the first time I've done this."

"The name?"

"Snow. Mr. Emmett Snow."

"GOOD TO SEE you again, Mr. Petrovich." The young man behind the deli's checkout counter smiled. "You don't usually come in here on Friday nights. Monday and Thursday, isn't it?"

"You're right." Nick shook his head in disbelief. He knew the fashionable West Hills deli was proud of their personalized service, but did they really memorize shopping patterns? "I'm surprised you remember me so clearly."

"It's easy. You always write checks, you've been coming in for

three weeks, and you always buy dinner for two. I figured you were dating someone in the neighborhood who likes to eat our cooking twice a week."

"Not quite," Nick corrected. "I'm a volunteer, helping a guy named Emmett Snow."

"Emmett Snow?" The clerk's eyes were wide. "I don't mean to be rude, but he's a grouchy old hermit. I can't imagine him accepting help from

anyone."

"Emmett's a bit stubborn," Nick conceded. Stubborn? His adoptee was a cantankerous, domineering pain in the behind, but Nick was determined to win him over before the holidays started. "I've hired someone to rake the leaves, clean the gutters, and we'll be weatherproofing the old house."

"Well, good luck with your project. You must be some kind of smooth talker, Mr. Petrovich."

Minutes later Nick parked his Mercedes, gathered up the grocery bags, and stepped into the inky darkness. As he made his way up the long stone path, he thought about Emmett's need for a security light.

As Nick reached the porch, the sound of metal on metal attracted his attention. Setting his groceries down and stepping out onto the grass, he caught sight of a tall figure wearing a stocking cap and heavy jacket emerging from the dimly lit toolshed. The intruder moved into the pool of light near the woodpile, testing the weight of an ax in gloved hands.

As Nick thought of Emmett Snow's vulnerability, his body went on full alert. Spotting a garden hose nearby, he picked up the gun-shaped nozzle, edging toward the woodpile.

"Freeze! We've got you covered!" Nick shouted, but the attacker turned for a frontal assault, raising the ax high.

"Put-the-ax-down!" Nick enunciated.

The heavy ax wobbled precariously. "Watch out! I just sharpened it!" the homicidal thug screamed as the ax head fell forward into the sawdust.

Caught up in the frenzy of the moment, Nick aimed the nozzle at the intruder and squeezed. A trickle of water gurgled out.

In the silence that followed, the stranger took off the stocking cap to reveal a tangle of burnished, shoulder-length hair. It was a rather beautiful woman.

"Excuse me." There was a sarcastic edge to her voice. "I think your gun has just sprung a leak."

At that moment Emmett Snow jerked the back door open. "What's all this yellin' and carrying on, Holly?" he demanded.

"I thought she was an intruder, Emmett." Nick moved toward her.

The older man's gaze lingered on Nick. "Petrovich! Nick! What the hell are you doing here?"

HOLLY LOOKED at the array of forbidden foods Nick Petrovich had set out on the kitchen table.

"There's enough for the three of us," the tall, dark-haired man assured her. "Are you still upset? I must have apologized three times—"

"Four," she corrected, suppressing a smile.

Mistaking her for an ax murderer was forgivable, but the potpourri of take-out food was something else. Then there was the issue of two volunteers sharing one adoptee, and finally, this man's overwhelming presence. It wasn't enough that he emanated self-confidence, success, intelligence and good humor, but he kept meeting her gaze with those incredible brown eyes.

"Nick, it's really nice of you to buy these take-out delicacies for Mr. Snow, but ninety percent of them aren't on his diet."

"What diet?" Nick opened another white carton.

"Mr. Snow is a diabetic. Didn't he tell you?"

"Well, I got the fire going," Emmett interrupted from the doorway. "Glad you brought the food. Holly was going to feed me shrimp salad and a bran muffin."

"What's this about a diet, Emmett?" Nick silently added the word crafty to cantankerous.

"Nonsense, two or three nights a week of real food won't hurt me, and it doesn't ruffle my blood sugar too much. Holly, why don't you join us for supper?"

"I visit you on Friday nights," Holly said. "Shouldn't you be inviting Nick to join us?"

The men exchanged a conspiratorial glance. "Why don't we all just have a little smorgasbord and get acquainted?" Nick suggested, handing Holly a paper plate.

"But what about Mr. Snow's diet?"

"Let me indulge him a little," Nick winked.

They ate in the living room by the blazing fire. Holly used the opportunity to study her fellow volunteer, who smiled easy and often. Each time Nick combed his carefully styled hair back with his fingertips, dark brown wisps fell onto his forehead, softening the classically handsome lines of his face. The firelight heightened the aura of warmth that surrounded the man.

Nick studied Holly's expression as Emmett talked about what she'd done. Shopping, preparing meals and freezing them, one-on-one care. She looked ethereal, rich auburn waves of hair backlit by the fire, creating a halo of red-gold around her heart-shaped face.

"Now, Holly, you should hear about everything Nick's done. He hired a company to rake the leaves and clean the gutters and another one to do the chimney. And he insists on paying for weatherproofing so I won't freeze to death in these drafty old rooms."

"You're very generous," Holly said to Nick. "But I think we might have a problem. Two volunteers and one adoptee—"

"I was thinking about that. Must be our last names. Petrovich and Peterson. They had a new person on the computer the morning I called, and I bet their data bank uses the first three letters of the last name."

"I didn't say anything because I need the both of you!" Emmett Snow wadded his napkin.

"But, Mr. Snow, what about Thanksgiving and Christmas?"

Holly asked. "You'll have to choose between us—"

"No problem," Nick interrupted. "I'm willing to spend both holidays with Emmett."

"So am I," Holly countered. "In fact, I was looking forward to it."

"Maybe the three of us can spend the holidays together, and until then, you and I can work out some alternating schedule." Nick stood up. "There's no such thing as too much attention."

"But there are different forms of attention." Holly picked up the plates and headed toward the kitchen.

Nick gathered utensils and napkins before joining her. "Look, we're both links in the Chain of Caring. It's obvious we each have unique talents to offer Emmett."

"Why is it that he allows you to call him Emmett and he's asked me to call him Mr. Snow?"

"Propriety, perhaps. Or male bonding."

Holly laughed at Nick's use of the buzzword, and he laughed with her. The sound made her like him even more.

"Anyway, Nick, we can't let Mr. Snow get too dependent on us. We have a four-month commitment to him, and then he'll be alone again." Holly poured water into the automatic coffeemaker while Nick slipped in the filter bin. "I think this is a great opportunity to make him realize he can still take charge of his own life."

"I agree." Nick reached over and turned on the switch to the coffeemaker. He leaned against the counter and folded his arms across his chest. Nick didn't want to talk about Emmett Snow, he wanted to ask about Holly Peterson. Why had she volunteered to help an elderly shut-in? Didn't she have a family or a social life?

"I was thinking, Holly." His voice was low and soft. "We might want our schedules to coincide now and then. I've enjoyed your companytonight. It's the first time I've ever been happy about a computer error."

Holly stood opposite him, her back hugging the counter. She didn't know whether to view Nick Petrovich as a rival or a man who could help her celebrate Christmas with all of her heart.

"I wouldn't mind having our schedules mingle now and then, either," she said quietly.

"Two TURKEYS?" Emmett Snow's figure blocked his front doorway. "I don't believe it. You each brought your own?"

"Happy Thanksgiving, Emmett." Nick couldn't hold back a laugh. He and Holly had met on the porch minutes earlier, each with roasting pan, bird and bag of stuffing.

"Happy Thanksgiving." Holly echoed the sentiment without glancing at Nick. She was annoyed.

"Ditto!" Emmett nodded at the two volunteers. "Just proves you should leave the cookin' up to a woman and let the man handle the carvin'."

"Emmett, I'm not going to argue that subject right now," Nick said.

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"Holly gave me a copy of the menu and a shopping list on Tuesday."

"Then you knew you were slotted to bring just the cranberries and vams."

"It's my mistake," Nick interjected. "When I walked into a downtown deli yesterday and saw this bird, it looked perfect. I admit I was impulsive."

Emmett scratched his chin. "Well, come on in. You didn't insulate the house just so I could leave the door open for ten minutes! I'll go pluck a coupla bristles out of the broom and you can draw straws on a turkey." He ambled off to the basement, leaving Nick and Holly alone in the entryway.

"And I didn't buy and defrost and lug this turkey over here just to draw straws!" Holly set down the roasting pan.

Nick forgot about straws and turkeys and Emmett Snow. Holly was wearing a soft pink sweater that hugged her curves without being overtly sexual. A double strand of pearls reflected the pastel hues of the sweater.

"You look beautiful," he said in a hoarse whisper. She was wearing more makeup today, and her dove gray eyes were as luminous as the pearls. "And please don't think I'm just trying to flatter you into submission. It's the truth."

"Thank you." Her annoyance was diminishing. "Submission? Do you honestly believe that one of us will surrender their bird?" Holly picked up her roasting pan and headed for the kitchen. "We might as well humor Mr. Snow and draw straws.

Whatever happens, we can go ahead and cook both turkeys. The lean meat will be great for his restricted diet, and I have an elderly neighbor who'd enjoy a portion of the left-overs."

"This is foolish," Holly protested as she surveyed the holiday table. "Everyone's so spread out. Why don't we all gather at one end?"

The three agreed, and the place settings were quickly rearranged, the tapered candles lit, the chandelier dimmed. Emmett Snow stood at the head of the table flanked by his two volunteers.

"If this isn't somethin'." He shook his head. "Two turkeys and all the trimmings. Sure beats the TV dinner I ate last year."

"There's something else here besides food, Emmett," Nick said quietly. "Two friends."

"I didn't forget. It's just that words don't always come easy for me. Like now. I want to thank the both of you, for your time and the food you brought and everything you've done." Emmett extended a hand to each. "I—I'd like to..." When his voice broke, he cleared his throat and looked down. "I'd like to say grace if you don't mind. But give me a minute to shake my memory."

Holly squeezed her adoptee's frail hand. He'd made a nuisance of himself in the kitchen, grumbled about the weather, taxes and his diabetes for the past six hours. That crusty, quarrelsome facade seemed to have vanished for the moment.

Holly looked across the table at Nick in profile. They'd compared notes on Portland while the turkeys roasted, discovering a shared love of spicy foods, ocean beaches, hiking and cross-country skiing.

Nick laughed at something Emmett said, then turned. His eyes met Holly's gaze. "Wait a second, Emmett. I made a mistake. I said two friends." Nick's tone was apologetic. "I should have said three." He reached across the table, offering his hand to Holly, who entwined her fingers through his, completing the triangle joined in giving thanks.

"Bless us, O Lord," Emmett mumbled the opening of his prayer. By the time he ended with "Amen" his voice had gathered strength, and in Holly's eyes, the elderly gentle-

man had grown in stature.

"Well, we can't eat if we're holding hands!" he said with a hearty laugh, loosening his grip. "Should we sit down and act like proper pilgrims?"

Holly felt Nick squeeze her hand firmly before releasing it. The mischievous gleam in his eyes and disarming smile made her pause. There was nothing proper or puritan about her fleeting thoughts.

"WHY AREN'T you sharing this day with family?" Nick asked as he offered Holly a refill of coffee.

He was seated opposite her on the rug in front of the fireplace. The rhythmic wheezing from the sofa across the room announced that Emmett was napping.

"I don't have any family left. My mother passed away in January, and my father died four years ago, when

I was twenty-eight."

"I'm sorry. Any brothers or sisters?"

"No, I'm a one and only. How about you? I bet you're from a big family."

"No. I was an only child, too, but I had so many cousins, I never had a chance to feel lonely, until I hit my teens."

"What happened then?"

"Sense of responsibility. Money was tight, and I had to save for college. My folks had high expectations." Nick turned to stare into the fire. "Success is doubly important when you know you'll support your parents in their old age."

"Where are they now?"

"Visiting Europe for a few months."

"Sounds like you're doing a good job of giving them support, Nick."

"Financially, yes, or at least I thought so. I've sent money home every month for years and thought they were using it to make their lives more comfortable. But I found out a few months ago that they'd been putting the money into a special account all this time, saving up for this trip."

"Maybe you shouldn't be so upset. They're spending your money doing what they want to do."

"Yeah, but I wanted them to have more time to relax and enjoy their retirement." Nick looked across the room at Emmett. Holly followed his gaze.

"Guilt?" she asked.

"Maybe." Nick slid his body over the rug until he was propped up against the love seat beside her. "You see, I helped my parents financially, but every time I went home for Christmas, I let them know I'd always been embarrassed about my immigrant roots. How's that for mixed messages?"

"I don't know. Sounds pretty human to me. And it's something that can be rectified when you see them again. You're lucky. When I lost my mother, there was a lot of unfinished business."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really. It's been a special day, and I want to savor the good feelings a little longer."

"I'm sorry. I've been talking about myself the whole time. I'd hoped to get to know you better to-

day, Holly."

"You did. How can two people spend hours in the kitchen, eat a Thanksgiving dinner together, wash and dry dishes and cut up leftovers from two turkeys without getting to know each other better?"

"You think I'm impulsive, don't

you?''

"I think you're indulgent, Nick." Reaching up, she covered his hand with hers. "But so far, everything else has felt right."

Nick bent his head and kissed her with a soft, searching caress. "I'd say it feels very right. I've been hoping that we might be able to share more than volunteer work."

Curling her fingers through his hair, Holly brought Nick's lips back down on hers, savoring the warmth of his mouth, the feel of his arms closing around her.

"I don't understand why, but I've been drawn to you," he whispered, "ever since that first night. I don't know how you feel, though. How do you feel?" he asked, the words dissolving into a deep moan as he kissed her hungrily.

Holly slowly broke off the kiss and sat up. She remained loosely imprisoned in his embrace, but she intended to speak her mind. Gently.

"I meant it, earlier, Nick, when I said you were indulgent." She touched his cheek. "I'm sorry, but I have a problem with people who use their money the way you do. I admire the way you support your parents, but the situation with Emmett is different."

Nick frowned. "When I see a need, I try to fulfill it. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." Her fingers dropped down to his shoulder. His suspenders had intrigued her all night. "But you've been hiring people to weatherize and rake leaves and clean the gutters."

"I can afford it, Holly."

"It's not a matter of money. I can afford the same luxuries—but I choose to do it in a different way, Nick. I prefer to give of myself."

"I thought I was giving of myself. It's my time, my money, my en-

ergy."

"Of course. I'm not saying you've done anything wrong. There's no wrong or right way to do volunteer work. I just think that you..." She was searching for the right word.

"You think I'm overdoing it."

"Perhaps." Holly let her finger glide down the suspender strap to Nick's chest. For a man who hired others to do physical labor, he was firm and well muscled. "Emmett needs us, Nick. He needs the small kindnesses and the conversation and knowing we care."

"Why can't I give him that and make repairs as well?"

It was hard to argue her point when he looked at her with those melting brown eyes. "I guess I'm talking about reaching a balance."

"Too late."

"What do you mean, too late?"

"I already bought new tile for the kitchen. The company delivered everything yesterday."

"And then their work crew will

show up and install it?"

"They'll tear up the worn linoleum and do some preliminary work. The tiles will be waiting in the spare bedroom."

"Waiting for what, another work crew?"

"Waiting for us. You and me, Holly. The champion tile-installment team of Portland's West Hills." Nick reached over and put a fresh log on the fire. "Am I getting closer to this delicate balance you mentioned?" He stroked the embers using the poker. "How about it, Holly?" He settled down beside her again. "The exciting smell of the glue, Emmett's roar when he sees his kitchen in disrepair for a few days? Are you up for some grubby work this weekend?"

"I'm sorry, Nick. I have plans for Saturday with Emmett."

He looked disappointed. "Here at the house?"

"No. Actually, I made reservations for two on the old sternwheeler before I knew I'd be sharing him with another volunteer." She felt a touch of remorse at not being able to invite Nick along, but it passed: "It's been years since Emmett's been on the Willamette, Nick," she explained. "And I thought he'd enjoy this short cruise. He needs to get out more."

"We can install the tiles the following weekend or some other time soon," Nick suggested. The smile was back. "If you're still interested," he added.

"I'm not backing out. It's a date. But *only* if you promise to wear suspenders again," she whispered.

"I THINK we know each other pretty well now, Holly. You don't need to call me Mr. Snow anymore. First names are fine," Emmett announced as he stood beside her on the promenade above the Willamette River.

She'd had the opportunity to study him during lunch. He had aged well, and was roguishly handsome with his white hair and mustache, square jaw, brooding dark eyes, rakish smile and proud posture. In his white shirt, tie, black overcoat and fedora, he looked like an elder statesman.

Holly knew little about his past and nothing about his former profession. Perhaps the day spent together, just the two of them, would encourage him to open up.

Emmett was staring intently at the opposite shore. Portland's east side fanned out before them, ending on the horizon with blue sky and Mount Hood's snow-topped splendor.

"Been a long, long time," Emmett said gruffly. "I don't remember Portland bein' this beautiful." He turned around and looked westward at the skyline. "The city's been growin' and changin'. And look at me. It makes me feel old."

"You don't look old, Emmett. You look like a handsome, dignified, mature gentleman." Holly squeezed Emmett's hand to reassure him. "There's one of the old stern-wheelers docked up ahead. I'm sure that's the one we're taking."

"She's a beauty. Makes me think of the old days when we'd cruise down the Columbia River to Astoria. Lord, is the sky really blue? How's the water?"

"Not as calm as it could be." Holly wrestled with the hem of her long, full skirt. Wearing a short wool jacket had been a mistake. The river breezes were lifting her hemline to immodest heights..

A line of passengers had assembled at the far end of the promenade. Emmett stopped suddenly.

"I can't do it," he announced firmly.

"Emmett, what's wrong?"

"Take me home. I just want to get the hell home."

"Emmett, you can tell me the truth. Is it the river? It's an old boat, but it's safe. They have regulations—"

"I'm not afraid of drowning in the fool river. It's the p-people." He turned away. "I'm more afraid of drowning in crowds. I thought I'd be fine, but I'm not used to being social, Holly. I don't get out like I used to and now..."

"Then we'll keep to ourselves at first." She took his arm, and he walked with uncertain steps toward the group.

"What if my blood sugar drops?

What if I get shaky?"

"I've got the blood sugar testing kit in my backpack. We both know how to use it. Nothing will go wrong, Emmett." She put her arm around him. How to calm someone you cared about? She'd failed miserably with her parents, and now they were both gone. Why didn't she have the insight to know this outing would be stressful for Emmett?

"I can't do it, Holly!" he whis-

pered.

"Everyone gets nervous about new situations," she said quietly. "But I'm here, Emmett. We're in control. Everything's going to be fine. In fact, there's a little surprise I didn't tell you about."

"I hate surprises."

"That's funny. So does Nick," she said with a chuckle. "This cruise is for people over sixty and their escorts. I couldn't get on without you, Emmett. There's going to be music from the thirties and forties, and couples can dance if they want. I thought you'd enjoy it."

"I don't want to dance!" Emmett insisted. "I want to go home."

Holly was filled with despair. After this fiasco, she might never get Emmett to leave his house again. She wanted to apologize....

"Why don't you let me help?"

Holly turned at the sound of the familiar male voice, and there was Nick Petrovich.

"Would you look at this?" He had reached into her jacket pocket. "Tickets for *three* passengers. You must have counted wrong, Holly. I guess the three of us can take this little cruise after all."

"Nick!" Emmett continued to grasp Holly's hand, his other hand now around Nick's forearm. "I'm not real sure about all this—"

"What? A ladies' man like you? There's going to be music and dancing. I have a feeling you're going to need me to fend off the female admirers." Nick slapped Emmett on the back.

"You'll have to point out some of the old landmarks to us," he continued. "Wait till you see the state-ofthe-art dry dock they've put in at the port."

Holly suddenly felt that her link in the Chain of Caring had weakened. Nick was horning in on her opportunity to share time with Emmett. Giving, sharing time. She would settle this with him later, and he'd better not mention male bonding unless he wanted a man-overboard situation.

Nick seemed to be avoiding her gaze. As they walked down the steps to embark, he kept up his steady banter with Emmett.

"Sorry I've got myself so upset, Holly." Emmett spoke after a long silence. While he put on his leather gloves, she looked up into the dark eyes of her fellow volunteer.

"Are you sure there isn't a problem with me tagging along?" Nick asked. "I had to pull a few strings to get the extra ticket, but I'll give it up if you want me to leave. I know this day means a lot to you, Holly, and I hesitated until I saw Emmett get up-set."

He'd seen it all from his position atop the knoll. Emmett asking to leave. Holly distraught, seemingly on the verge of tears, but persevering. Holly in sunlight with her hair afire battling to keep her long skirt at a modest height.

"I want to help, Holly. I thought you could use a second party."

"You mean a third party, don't you? This was meant to be a party of two."

"So I'm an interloper?" He spoke close to her ear. "One last time. Do you want me to leave?"

They were next in line.

"Tickets, please," the man in uniform asked.

Holly took the three tickets from Nick's hand and passed them to the man. "This might sound like a contradiction, Nick, but you're an interloper and a lifesaver rolled into one rather attractive package. Thanks for coming."

SUNLIGHT flickered through the large picture windows of the boat's main deck, casting the dancing couples in silhouette.

"May I have this dance or what's left of it, Holly?" Nick offered his hand. "Don't worry about Emmett. We can watch him from the floor."

"But-"

"I can't let this music or the sunshine go to waste," Nick insisted, pulling Holly to her feet.

She began moving gracefully to the beat, watching their fellow dancers, incorporating elements of their style. The long, full skirt of her dress flared, exposing an enticing stretch of leg.

Nick watched her eyes move from his face to the scene beyond him. Emmett sat with three other men near the picture windows at the front of the cabin.

"It looks as though Emmett's made some friends." She smiled up at Nick. "I was hoping his friends might include a female or two."

"He needs male companionship, too. And getting to know a woman

takes time."

"Really?" Holly raised her brows. "You sound experienced. Tell me, at what point does a man feel he really knows a woman? When she's in his bed?"

"No, I think it's before that. When she's in his heart."

"You're a bit old-fashioned, aren't you, Nick?"

"I've been told I tend to put women on pedestals."

"Designer pedestals?"

"Smart mouth. Whatever they are, I'm learning to lower them ever...so...slowly."

They danced every song, bracing themselves whenever the wake from a barge struck the stern-wheeler.

"Holly? I'd like this dance, please."

It was Emmett Snow.

Holly smiled and took his hand.

"Do you know this tune?" Emmett asked. "It's called 'When I Grow Too Old to Dream."

"What a beautiful title."

"It was our song, Delilah's and mine."

"Were you married to Delilah, Emmett?"

"You know I'm a bachelor." His voice was a hollow whisper. "But my Delilah was the one woman I wanted to marry. I lost her to another man when I was in my early thirties. Sad thing."

Holly grew quiet, allowing Emmett to retreat into his memories. When the song ended, he held her loosely in his arms. When the music began again, he didn't move. A tear glistened on his weathered cheek.

"Do you want to talk about it, Emmett?"

"I've told you before I'm not one for words." His voice broke. "Don't get me wrong, girl. I still feel things deeply. Makes me feel alive. Maybe that's why I like to get angry now and then."

"Is that right? Don't expect me to let you use that excuse too often!" Holly hugged him gently.

Emmett chuckled and rested his palm against her cheek. "Thanks for today, Holly." He moved toward the closest window. "I met some pretty nice fellas this afternoon." His voice brightened. "Looks like we'll get together for some fishing in the spring."

Holly glanced up and met Nick's penetrating stare from across the room. There was promise of an-

other kind in his eyes.

"ANONYMOUS donor?" Holly echoed. Emmett had led her to the room he called the parlor. "You mean someone just left a color television set, VCR and assorted tapes on your doorstep this past week?"

"Amazing, isn't it? And look." Emmett pressed the remote control. "They had cable installed, too!"

"Incredible. And did this same generous soul give you the shiny new exercise bike?" Holly ran her palm over the padded handlebars and tractor seat.

Emmett nodded. "Must have known I needed to exercise every day to keep my blood sugar in control."

"Where is Nick? I saw his car out front."

"You're too smart, Holly. He's in the kitchen."

"Did he start installing tiles early, Emmett?"

"No," Nick answered from the doorway. "We're a team, remember?"

How could she forget when he looked at her with those brown eyes and that smile? "I remember. But teammates are usually pretty honest with each other. Emmett told me about his anonymous donor."

"Yeah, the city's thick with 'em this time of year." Nick hung her jacket on the coat tree. "There's no way we'll be able to track the monster down."

"Funny." Holly folded her arms and leaned against the banister. "You don't look like a monster."

"Emmett had to start watching something other than game shows, Holly." Nick lowered his voice. "You know, I read up on diabetes and discovered the importance of exercise. The electronic gadgetry will help him keep track of his mileage and make it fun for him."

Nick was being perfectly sensible. He was motivated by concern for Emmett's health...and he was wearing faded denims, a blue work shirt and narrow red suspenders.

Nick must have seen her eyes drop down to his chest. "By the way, I remembered your request," he said, looping a thumb around a crimson strap. "Ready to start tiling the kitchen?" He walked into the living room and, picking up a pair of paper overalls, handed them to her. "Here. I brought these for you to cover your clothes. Maybe we can dance on the floor after we finish, as a sort of celebration."

"You'd use anything as an excuse to give gifts and celebrate, wouldn't you?" Holly chided, stepping into the right leg of the overalls.

"But today is special," Nick said. "Normally Croatians celebrate Saint Nicholas Day on December 6, but it falls on a weekday this year, so we exchange gifts on the Sunday before or after. It's the biggest gift-giving day of the holiday season. When I was a kid in Chicago, the Croatians would play the tambura, dance the kolo and sing." His expression grew wistful.

"I didn't know," Holly said softly. "I should have brought you something."

"You already have, partner." Nick boldly zipped up the front of her overalls before he handed her a trowel.

"LOOKS LIKE we're done." Nick stood back and looked at the glossy surface of the newly tiled floor. It had gone fine, he thought. They'd wiped up the tile adhesive, then mopped and waxed the floor, all by four o'clock.

"Not bad. And it's still daylight," Holly commented as she shimmied out of the overalls to reveal her slender form once again. Late-afternoon sunlight flooded through the sheer dining room curtains, backlighting her hair with a halo of red-gold.

"We can't dance on the newly waxed floor, Holly—" Nick slipped his arms around her "—but maybe we can do another kind of dance. Cheek to cheek." Holding her closer, he brushed his lips against her cheekbone. "Mouth to mouth." The tip of his tongue outlined the generous curve of her mouth. "And lip to lip." He tasted the inner softness of her mouth before kissing her fully.

Her fingertips edged down the single suspender strap above the small of his back to the waistband of his pants. With a gentle tug she pulled his shirttail out and smoothed her hands over the flesh of his lower back.

The steady hum of the exercise bike that had been coming from the front parlor ceased abruptly.

"You think Emmett's all right?" Holly asked.

"He simply took a breather. That shouldn't stop us from what we're doing—"

"He might be having insulin shock. It's that time of day." She gave him an enchanting smile as she eased out of his arms. "Let me just take a look."

They found Emmett sitting on the sofa watching an old black-and-white movie.

"She's in this one," he stated flatly. "I wasn't sure at first, but it's Delilah."

"The woman you mentioned to Holly last weekend?" Nick asked.

"Yep. She plays the maid. This is the first course, so she'll be back to clear the dishes away. Such a good actress. She should been playing the lead!"

As the fair-haired Delilah delivered seven courses and removed the dishes, Nick and Holly listened to Emmett's recollection of his lost love.

"We met when we were in group theater here in Portland. We saw each other for more than a year, and I asked her to marry me. I was tied down to the family business. Snow's Shoes. But Delilah had dreams of her own. She wanted to go to Hollywood to work in movies. We did a musical production, and she took a likin' to one of the dancers, Clarence Carpenter. A few months later they got married and moved down to Los Angeles."

"And you never married?" Nick asked.

"No, I've had my lady friends over the years, but there was no one like Delilah. I spotted her in movies now and then. I heard she had kids eventually, and then maybe five years ago, I got a Christmas card. Her husband had died. No return address, but a California postmark."

While Holly and Emmett talked about Delilah's acting skills, Nick began to plot. If he could get more information from his adoptee and hire a private investigator in California, there was a chance he'd have a very special surprise for Emmett this Christmas.

Nick looked over at Holly. Would she consider his search for Delilah a gift of self, a gift from the heart, or just another extravagance?

"WELCOME TO the Nirvana Tree Farm!" a smiling young woman shouted before she motioned Holly and Nick to the right with a mittened hand. Holly brought her compact van to a slippery stop in the muddy field.

A light snow had fallen in the hills southeast of Portland, giving the

area an enchanting quality.

"Maybe we really have found Nirvana." Nick sighed as he took Holly's hand in his. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

The whole morning had been beautiful for Holly, from the moment she picked Nick up at his high-rise condo. The scenic drive gave them the opportunity to talk without interruption.

It was the first chance she'd had to hear Nick really discuss his work, to describe how he combined his degree in architecture and love of design with his skills as a computer programmer. Nick was a man who'd shaped his own destiny by remaining on the leading edge, by taking chances, and anticipating new frontiers of innovative design. Juxtaposed with his stylish exterior and air of success was the humility and oldworld charm she'd come to love.

"Hey, folks—" a gangly adolescent tossed them each a candy cane

"—we've got free hot coffee, hot chocolate and fresh popcorn over by the warming fire. Help yourself."

Holly was overwhelmed. An urbanite, she'd always gone to a city lot

and bought a precut tree.

"What kind of tree are you folks looking for?" he asked. "There's Douglas fir, Noble fir, Scotch pine, White fir, Norway spruce, Colorado blue spruce."

"I feel like we're at the ice-cream parlor." Holly shrugged. "I didn't think there'd be so many choices. Can we just look around a bit and see what we like?"

"Sure." The boy pulled a map out of his back pocket. "Here's the layout of the acreage, a list of all the trees and the price codes." He loped off toward the next arrival.

By the warming fire, they studied

the layout.

"How do you feel about the Noble fir?" Nick asked. "I hear they're the most expensive, but the best."

"Says who?"

"My friend, Mitch Donnelly, the sports doctor who lives one floor up. He says the ornaments hang better."

"An expert on limbs, right?"

Nick laughed.

She pointed to the area marked D. "If you don't mind, Nick, I'd like to look at a Douglas fir. If we think real hard, maybe we'll figure out a way to hang the ornaments on it."

"My FATHER carved this ornament for me when I was just a boy." Emmett pulled a tiny wooden shoe out of the box of tissue-wrapped treasures at his feet. Nick was careful not to disturb any of Emmett's heirloom glass ornaments hanging on the lower branches as he climbed the ladder and hung the shoe on an upper bough. He watched Holly take another bourbon ball off the ninetyproof dessert tray.

When they arrived with the Christmas tree, Emmett had "supper" waiting—a light vegetable soup, hot mulled wine and an assortment of tiny rum-soaked cakes, bourbon balls and strawberries filled with orange liqueur, all from the neighborhood deli. While Emmett limited himself to soup, Nick and Holly had almost demolished the tray of delectables.

"Feeling tipsy yet?" Nick asked Holly. "Those bourbon balls can

pack a wallop."

"I don't feel a thing. Maybe I have a hollow leg," she teased back, turning in a graceful circle. She'd changed into a long flowing skirt and a red-and-white sweater after their trek to the woods.

The trimming of the tree had been a festive event. Baroque Christmas music and the warm light from the fireplace added to the feeling of celebration.

"That's the last of the ornaments," Emmett announced twenty minutes later. "What we need now is a star. I told you I broke mine years ago—"

"I bought a new one for you, Emmett," Nick said. "Look in the white box."

"And I made one for you," Holly countered.

"Hell's bells," Emmett sputtered. "Can't you two stop getting your wires crossed? This is as bad as the two turkeys."

Nick looked over at Holly. Had he done it again? Stolen her thunder, demeaned her simple offering?

"This here's the one Nick bought," Emmett grumbled and Nick could hear his raspy intake of breath as he picked up the shimmering gold-plated star. Inset in the center was a hologram by a noted Portland artist depicting the earth as seen from space.

"Heavens!" Emmett's fascination was obvious. "How did they do that? There's a little world in there."

"Holly?" Nick saw her hesitancy.

"My star is homemade, Emmett." She'd made a five-point star covered with a flat, shiny sheet of tinsel.

"I admit it's simple, Holly." Emmett tilted his head and watched the star spin. "But she's a beauty. Looks a lot like the ones my mother made for the poor. She did volunteer work, you know."

"Thank you, Emmett, but I won't force you to make a decision." Holly took the star from him.

"He won't have to make a decision. Give me the star of tinsel, Holly." Nick's fingers brushed hers as he accepted it. "It's beautiful, Holly. Made of love." With those words, he climbed the ladder and placed the star atop the tree. Two steps down and he was beside her again, taking her in his arms. "Don't forget to make a wish," Nick whispered. "I made mine this afternoon."

"It's past my bedtime!" Emmett proclaimed. "If you two don't mind, I'm keeping the gold star in my bedroom."

"Wait!" Holly said and insisted upon testing his blood sugar before he left. When Emmett was settled, she returned to the living room.

Guitar music was playing, adding to the ambience of warm light and faded festivity. Nick held out his hand to her and smiled. "I thought it might be nice to end this special night with a little waltz around the room."

His arm moved around her waist, and Holly found herself drawn against Nick's solid chest. Dance after dance, they circled and swirled, caught in a maelstrom of emotion and desire. When the music stopped, Nick gave her one final spin, then drew her back into his arms. After a long moment he raised her palm to his mouth and kissed the sensitive skin.

"I want you, Holly," he whispered. "I wish I could dance you to the edge of this rug and find us both standing in my bedroom, but there's the matter of several miles separating where we are from where I believe we both want to be."

Was the warmth that flowed through her love, or should she blame the bourbon balls? Holly wondered. So little needed to be said.

Holly checked on Emmett and turned off the Christmas tree, while Nick banked the fire. He held out her jacket. "If I recall, I'm the designated driver tonight. Any argument?"

"None," Holly murmured.

DURING THE quick drive to his condo, Nick prayed the magic of the evening would not diminish. He kept the lights dimmed as he led Holly into his large living room.

He studied her awed expression as she took in the panoramic view of the Willamette River, a shimmering ribbon of silver dividing the sparkling lights of downtown Portland and the city's east side.

"Nick, your view—" Holly stammered.

"Hush." He took her hands and kissed each palm before resting them against his chest. "My view can't compare to your beauty, Holly. And I'm twice blessed. There's no glass between us. In a few minutes nothing will separate us."

"I'd like that."

Raising his hand, Nick touched a fingertip to the top button of Holly's V-necked cardigan. The buttons gave easily as did those on the blouse beneath. In moments she stood before him wearing only a pink satin teddy edged in lace. In the subdued lighting, shadows he longed to explore hid the rise of her breasts.

"You're even more beautiful than I imagined," he said in a hoarse whisper.

She moaned as he brushed the outer curve of her breasts with his palms. The silk slithered beneath his touch as he stroked his thumbs across the hardened buds at the crest of her curves.

Nick was only vaguely aware of her hands until he felt her breath against the bare flesh of his chest. She'd unbuttoned his shirt and was spreading her fingers across his midriff.

"I'm fascinated with your suspenders, but I'll have to take them off if I want to see all of you, Mr. Petrovich."

She pulled his shirttails from his jeans as he looked at her with a mixture of surprise and passion. With a smile, she held up his shirt and tossed it into the air.

With Nick's upper torso open to the warmth of her gaze, she let her hands slip to his belt buckle.

"Let me," he offered.

"But this is half of my pleasure," she protested.

"At the moment it's my torment," Nick corrected.

Reluctantly she let him take the lead, knowing there would be another time when she would insist on undressing him slowly, with teasing touches and languid strokes of her tongue. But tonight their passion was unleashed, and they were unwilling to wait.

When Nick stepped out of his jeans, he was wearing only narrow black briefs. Scandalously brief.

He observed Holly's reaction with a chuckle. "And they say women don't react to visual stimuli as strongly as men. I'd say we're even. I love this wispy little thing you're wearing." His fingers brushed the tiny satin straps of her teddy from her shoulders. The bodice fell to her waist.

But his eyes remained locked with hers. With gentle movements he pulled the fabric over her hips. She was naked, but Nick continued to focus on her face, giving her that mysterious, knowing smile.

"Nick," Holly whispered, pressing his hands to her breasts. He tested their weight, brushing the dusky rose tips with his thumbs until she moaned and moved against him.

Nick lowered her to the sea of pillows in a corner of his living room.

Holly's fingers stroked him through the black briefs. He took a deep breath of anticipation as she edged the fabric down. Nick shuddered when Holly's fingers curled around him, stroking and caressing him with the soft, clinging warmth of her hand.

Holly felt her own waves of desire at knowing she had aroused Nick to such a state. She studied the whole man—the broad shoulders, the firmly muscled midriff and the slim hips—while her hand explored the silk and steel of his heavy arousal, then moved over his hip to caress the firm rounded flesh of his buttocks, to urge his body closer.

The faint smell of pine wafted from him. It was still in his hair, on his skin, a reminder of their day of sharing.

Her fingers caught in his hair as he brought his mouth down to her breast and lightly touched a swollen tip with rhythmic, flicking motions of his tongue.

He drew her into his mouth, gradually expanding the circles his tongue made until Holly closed her eyes against the exquisite sensation. Flashes of light played against her eyelids, and her heartbeat seemed to pulse wherever Nick moved his tongue.

His nails raked gently over her abdomen, his fingers taking her with a slow intimate possession. When she tightened her muscles at the pleasurable feeling, he relaxed his movements only to begin again.

"Love me, Nick," she pleaded in a voice she hardly recognized.

His fingers entered her again, gauging her readiness. "Not until you're ready for me." The tip of his tongue caught the edge of her mouth, outlining the fullness of her lips before plunging deep inside. "I don't want to hurt you, Holly."

He moved lower, leaving a trail of glistening moisture from the edge of her delicate jawline to the scented valley between her breasts.

He paid homage to her perfection with his hands and mouth, with words whispered into the hollow of her throat, against the silken sweep of her thighs.

Not trusting the vestige of control that remained, Nick splayed his fingers against Holly's narrow waist and urged her to move over him.

She watched the loving message in his dark, expressive eyes as she hovered above him. Trembling, she lowered herself to accept the throbbing pressure that brought a flare of renewed pleasure.

With each measured thrust the chaotic rhythm of desire that had built all day evolved into a harmonious blending of male and female, uniting them.

Holly opened her eyes as her pleasure peaked and spiraled.

Then Nick's strong arms pulled her down against him as he shuddered with his own release. Afterward they lay a heartbeat apart, and she felt her eyes grow moist from the beauty and completeness of their loving.

Long moments later she heard Nick murmur softly to her, then felt his arms lifting her, carrying her. She stirred again when he settled her against cool sheets.

"Good night, love," he whispered, tucking her into the warm curve of his body.

HOLLY STOOD at one of the floor-toceiling windows sipping coffee, then moved to the next glass panel as she took in Nick's view of Portland. If only it were this easy to get a better perspective of her feelings.

The day had started in afterglow. She'd opened her eyes to find Nick touching her hair, smiling down at her. They made love again, tender, unhurried love.

As their breathing slowed to normal and morning light illuminated his bedroom, Holly felt an uneasy ache in her stomach. The room was a sterile blend of black lacquered furniture in bold art-deco designs and scarlet linens and accents. Two erotic line drawings hung near the bed, but it was the neon half-moon in the corner that caught her eye. Nick had a manufactured moon in his bedroom.

They showered together, exploring each other's bodies anew. As Nick dried her back with a large towel, she took in the details of the high-tech black-and-white bath-

room. The uneasy ache in Holly's stomach became a knot. Like the bedroom, the bathroom decor was sleek, beautiful, tasteful, but was it Nick? Or was there another side to the man, a side she had yet to explore?

"NICK! I've been missing my workout partner. Where've you been?"

Nick looked up from the display case to see Dr. Mitch Donnelly approaching across the plush carpet of Portland's finest jewelry store. Damn. The timing was rotten. He was already having second thoughts about his purchases. The presence of a twice-divorced, confirmed bachelor was the last thing he needed.

"Mitch." Nick greeted his friend in a subdued tone. "Sorry I've missed you. I had to rearrange my

workout schedule lately."

"Meaning things went well with the redhead and your volunteer tiling project?"

"Yeah, the floor looks great."
"I was more interested in the red-

head."

"Her name is Holly, Mitch." Nick looked anxiously at the clerk who'd been waiting on him. "I'll just say the relationship is moving along nicely."

"If you'd just sign this, Mr. Petrovich. We're wrapping your pack-

ages now."

Nick bent down to sign the charge

slip.

"So, Nick, have you done a little Christmas shopping for this Holly?" Mitch tried glancing over Nick's shoulder, then waited until the clerk

returned to the register. "Exactly what did you buy her?"

"A little jewelery. She's very special to me." Disappear! Nick wanted to shout. "What are you in here for?"

"I'm having a diamond replaced in my watch. So, how serious is this thing with your fellow volunteer?"

"Speaking of that, Dr. Donnelly..." Nick steered the conversation away from Holly. "I told you about the older man we're spending time with. He's having some problems with blood-sugar fluctuation. I want to pick out one of those electronic monitors—"

"How's his eyesight?"

"He's mentioned that it's fail-

ing."

"Then I'd recommend one of the new audible readout meters. The blood sugar is read aloud by an electronic voice. In fact, I know a supply place over by Sandy Boulevard. We can drive over there now, and I'll help you pick one out."

"No, I can't impose on you like

that.''

"It's no problem," Mitch countered. "Actually, I'd love to help. Let me get this diamond replaced, and I'll be right with you."

Nick stepped to the end of the counter. "Are my packages ready

vet?"

"Here they are, Mr. Petrovich." The young woman slipped two gift-wrapped boxes into a gold brocade sack. "You still seem a little uncertain, sir."

He shrugged. "I guess the holidays do funny things to people."

"Yes, they can. If you change your mind about the ring just ask for me by name."

Nick thought of the thin gold band decorated with a wheat pattern broken by the glimmer of recessed diamonds. The design was elegantly simple. The only question was the purpose. Was this a friendship ring or the accompaniment to a proposal?

"SRE-ZIC...how's it go?" Emmett leaned forward.

"Are you sure you didn't drink more than one glass of that champagne?" Nick teased. "Okay. Try it again. *Sretan Božić*." He pronounced each syllable.

Emmett repeated it. "Hear that, Holly? I'm saying Merry Christmas in Croatian."

Holly's soft laughter was lost in the joyous Christmas music emanating from the compact-disc player Nick had given Emmett. Nick had also given him a rechargeable flashlight, a portable smoke detector and half a dozen other gadgets.

Emmett tore open another of Holly's packages. "A hat! A good, sensible hat to help me keep these addled brains together. Thanks." He blew her a kiss.

Holly sat back feeling a tug of satisfaction. She'd given Emmett handmade scarves, a thick, water-resistant hat, woolen socks, fleece-lined slippers, rainbow-colored candles, a sweater that matched his blue eyes and two plain Pendleton blankets. He seemed genuinely over-joyed.

"This is the last gift from me." Nick started to hand Emmett a rectangular box, but in his eagerness, unwrapped it himself. "It's an electronic blood-sugar monitor. Now, let me explain."

Holly watched and listened as Nick went through the process step-by-step. She was impressed by Nick's thoughtfulness. The monitor would improve the quality of Emmett's life more than any of their other gifts. When the electronic voice announced the test results, Emmett wanted a second go at it.

"There'll be time tomorrow," Nick said. "We don't want you to get fanatical about it."

Gradually Holly became aware of the sound of sharp pings against the roof and windows, and together she and Nick joined Emmett at his picture window. The streetlight illuminated a sleeting shower of rain. In minutes the pellets of ice increased to a thundering bombardment.

"Weather idiots on television. This wasn't in the forecast," Emmett muttered. "I'd say we'll be waking up to a good old-fashioned silver thaw."

"Maybe we'll have just the one shower." Holly tried to add a note of optimism.

Nick checked the thermometer. "It's dipped below twenty degrees. Whatever isn't ice could freeze on contact."

They shared a cup of hot tea and stood watching the street turn into a shimmering river of ice.

"It's time I turned in. I'm not one for words—" Emmett began.

"Don't give us that!" Nick cuffed him lightly on the chin. "Now what were you going to say?"

Emmett cuffed Nick back. "I just wanted to say I had a good time. In fact, it was great. And I wanted to ask if you two could spend the night?" The joviality was gone. "I'm worried about the two of you gettin' home. The roads'll be dangerous. I got sleepin' bags and extra robes. My sister back East sends me a robe every Christmas. My closets are full of 'em."

"Emmett, we'll stay-" Holly be-

"Once I go to bed," he interrupted, "I'm dead to the world, I won't be botherin' you." He winked.

"No problem." Nick put his arm around Holly and drew her close. "Help us find those robes and sleeping bags, then you get to bed and bundle up. And we'll keep the home fires burning."

NICK TOOK a small oblong box from under the tree. "For you, Holly."

With a timid smile she accepted the package. Unwrapping it slowly, she saw the logo of the jewelry store.

"Nick—" she began to protest.

"Go ahead. Open it."

She heard her own quick intake of air as a necklace slithered into her palm. The gold was cool against her skin. The design was simple, elegant, perfect.

"Oh my God. It's exquisite,

Nick."

"Here, let me," he offered, fastening the clasp. His fingers slipped to her jawline. "The necklace is a reminder. We're both links in the Chain of Caring, and, Holly, this is a reminder of how much I care about you."

"I don't know what to say. Thank

you."

The flame that had leaped into awareness soon after they met flared. While the sights and smells of Christmas surrounded her, she felt overwhelmed by the feel of Nick's thumb touching the clasp of her necklace, rolling the gold against her flesh in an erotic dance of promise.

Then with a clarity that surprised her, she felt like a traitor to her past. Each Christmas she'd allowed her parents to infuse meaning into the holiday. Never again, she'd recently promised herself, would she fall so completely under the spell of the season. But the gold chain was the pony and the clown and the hired Santa from her childhood. Holly swallowed hard as hot tears filled her eyes.

She turned away from Nick. Why was the past always waiting to sabo-

tage the joy of the present?

"You should save your tears for morning." Nick lifted her face to his gaze. "Croatians believe water is blessed by angels' wings on Christmas morning." He bent low and kissed her cheek.

"Are these tears of joy, Holly?"

Holly closed her eyes. She wasn't being fair. Nick expressed his love in so many ways. Why not allow him this extravagance?

"Tears of joy, of course." She wiped her cheeks impatiently and knelt down beside the tree. "I hesitate to have you open this, Nick. I really didn't expect the necklace."

Holly pulled a shoe-box-shaped package from under the tree.

Nick opened the box and pushed the tissue aside. A wide-eyed sock monkey stared back at him with an ear-to-ear red cotton grin.

"Jocko." For a moment he wasn't certain he'd said the name aloud. Then he looked up at Holly. "Where did you find him?"

"What? I made it. What did you call him?"

"Jocko." The tears that gathered in Nick's eyes seemed more a reflex than a conscious emotion. "Ages ago my mother made a sock monkey for me for Christmas. I must have been about four or five. I remember being embarrassed because the other kids got toy trucks or guns. But I loved the little guy. He was the only Croatian-speaking monkey in Chicago."

Nick looked into Holly's soft gray eyes. "I sometimes wonder," he mused, "if I'd been given all the toys I wanted, would I have studied architecture? It all comes together in the end, doesn't it, Holly? The pieces fall in place."

They were only inches apart, facing each other. Nick moved closer, adjusting the monkey on his knee. Their backs were against the love seat, their legs stretched out over the sleeping bags they'd zipped together to form one large bed.

"It comes together in the end, but the road is different, often bumpier, for some." She looked into the fireplace, her features contemplative. "You don't know how rich you were as a child, Nick, emotionally and spiritually. You were given a wealth of tradition, a sense of your people and their values."

Nick nodded and put his arm around her. "Makes me feel bad now to think my mother never realized how much I secretly loved her gift. But why should that surprise me? This holiday season has been full of regrets and remembrances—and I'm glad we met the way we did, under Emmett's roof. I don't know where I'd be tonight if it hadn't been for you."

"I would have been at home watching It's A Wonderful Life for the first time without my mother and crying into my popcorn because...the reality of her death would hit me pretty hard. I thought of her tonight, Nick. I have my regrets and remembrances, too, but my life wouldn't have been this wonderful tonight without you."

She reached out to touch Jocko II. "I put some very special stuffing inside this guy," she whispered. "He's full of the hopes and dreams of a special little boy grown into manhood. He's stitched with love, Nick. My love."

"Holly, do you realize how much I need you?" There was a tortured rasp in Nick's voice.

She turned her head at the sound, reacting in part to the sudden tensing along the sinewy muscles of his thigh where her forearm rested. Captured by the longing in his eyes, Holly sat up on her knees and put her arms around his neck.

"Nick." She pressed a finger to his mouth.

"I love you." He spoke the words against her fingertips. "You must

know that by now, but I want to say it aloud. Give it power."

He kissed each eyelid, whispering her name as his lips moved back to her mouth. The kiss was ravaging, raw, a complete possession. His hands moved over the curve of her jaw, down the slender column of her neck.

His hands pressed against the cool satin collar of her robe, edging it back slowly to reveal the bra that caressed her breasts like a second skin. The velvet robe slipped to the edge of her shoulders, leaving a portion of her upper body open to his gaze.

He rose up and took her in his arms, rolling her onto her back on the double cushion of sleeping bags and brushing his lips against the silken softness of her flesh, his tongue gliding down the valley between her breasts.

Holly felt as though she hovered between the reality of loving and the illusory world of being loved. Nick had said he loved her, but the words refused to penetrate. She allowed her mind to drift, but there were only colored lights and Nick's firelit features and his quick, uneven breathing.

He moved up to whisper endearments. As Nick took the lobe of her ear between his teeth, his fingertips touched the crest of each breast. Even in the dim light Holly sensed his hunger, and her own passion was doubled.

"We've memorized each other's bodies with our eyes. I want to learn you with my hands and mouth, Nick." She flattened her palms against the black velvet lapels of his tartan robe, moving her thumbs out to stroke the smooth muscled flesh within her reach.

Making love with their robes on heightened the exhilaration of relearning the planes and hollows, the curves and textures of each other's body.

A gust of wind howled down the chimney, igniting the smoldering embers. Holly felt the sudden flare of heat against the side of her face and her thigh. Her hands slipped beneath the tartan plaid to find the smooth curve of Nick's buttocks. fingertips trailing over his flesh, absorbing the shock of each of his measured thrusts. Her nails dug into his skin, the jolts of pleasure intensified, fanning the fire of their fused rhythm until the peak was within her reach. She closed her eyes against the explosion of sensations, holding fast to the image of angel wings fluttering, flying higher-to somewhere silver, flooded by the halo of a hundred shimmering moons.

"IF MY MOTHER could see me now, cooking the Christmas feast in the fireplace!" Nick loosened the scarf around his neck. He transferred the traditional sarma, stuffed cabbage, from the plate Holly held to the pan on the makeshift grill. "In Chicago my Uncle Ivan would have smoked a small pig, and there'd be baskets of cakes." He turned to Holly. "I wish you could see it. The relatives, the noise, the Yule log, and then there's the feasting, music and dancing. All this chaos and confusion mixed with moments of solemnity."

"It's kind of hard to hold to tradition during an ice storm and power failure." She spoke in a goodnatured tone as she set the plate on the hearth.

Their banter was interrupted when Emmett tapped his finger against the barometer, then looked at the thermometer. "We're down to ten degrees. Pretty low for these parts. Looks like the whole neighborhood's lost power. Phone's still workin', though. I'm goin' to start saving up scraps for the birds."

Nick frowned and stood up. Emmett had been nervous and slightly disoriented all morning. What if he'd been alone at a time like this?

If only Delilah Carpenter had agreed to a Christmas reunion. She'd contacted Nick three days earlier by registered mail, stating her interest in returning to Portland and seeing Emmett Snow, but also expressing uncertainty about it.

"Excuse me. I'm goin' to call a coupla friends across town, wish them Merry Christmas and make sure they're doing all right. You know, the guys I met on the stern-wheeler. Bernie and Gus and Ray." Picking up one of the blankets Holly had given him, Emmett draped it over his shoulders and headed for the kitchen.

Nick glanced over at Holly, who sat cross-legged by the hearth. Her smile appeared a little self-satisfied. "Emmett is wearing your sweater, your hat, your mittens and your homemade scarf, and now he's swathed in your blanket. Do I detect a bit of gloating?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Me? Gloat?" Holly stifled a laugh. "Emmett might be bundled up in my gifts, but the electronic blood-sugar monitor is the one item that will benefit him the most in the long run. You put a lot of thought into that. I'm not gloating. Here, help me move the coffee table over so I can set it."

"We're eating dinner in the living room?"

"The fireplace makes it the warmest room in the house. This will be the most unforgettable feast we'll ever have."

"Especially when I'm sitting here chewing on cabbage rolls and thinking of how we made love on this very spot last night. How am I going to concentrate?" Nick leaned across the coffee table until his lips hovered over hers. "You're turning our bed of roses into a buffet table."

"What can I say, Mr. Gourmand? Bon appétit! And what makes you think you'll be the only one having trouble with concentration?"

"ADESTE FIDELES," Holly began singing softly into the wool of her muffler as she plodded through ice-encrusted snow to the woodshed.

She would have been satisfied with a white Christmas. Three or four inches of pristine snow. The silver thaw had frozen the city. Travelers were stranded, families separated, lives endangered.

Nick had volunteered to knock on the doors of all the neighboring houses to see if anyone needed help. Emmett was busy making phone calls, so Holly was left to tend the fire. With the house growing colder by the hour, she'd decided to gather more wood.

And think.

What was she going to do about Nick Petrovich? How did he fit into her life? The old-world charm was in full bloom. Though he joked about some of the Croatian customs, he observed the ceremonies with reverence. She'd looked up several times during the Christmas meal to find him staring at the traditional candle nestled in the bowl of wheat with a faraway look in his eyes. His expression grew serious as he snuffed out the flame with a piece of *Pogača*, sweet bread, dipped in wine.

At that moment, as the smoke wafted upward, Holly realized she would have to reexamine her reasons for loving Nick. To accomplish that, it might be necessary to cut back on their time together.

"Holly?"

She turned at the sound of his voice. Nick was standing in the snow just beyond the woodshed.

"How are all the neighbors doing?"

"There's a tree down on one roof and another house has frozen pipes that burst." Nick began helping her load wood into the carrier. "They've got plenty of food and firewood. Everyone's watching out for each other. It's nice to see people pulling together."

"Especially on Christmas," she added.

"Holly," Nick said, "I need to talk to you."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong." His fingers touched her hand. "In fact, things have never been so right." Gently he urged her away from the woodpile. "I want to thank you for making this a perfect celebration."

"We were both a part of that, Nick."

"Maybe. I just want you to know I'm thankful. I feel fulfilled, and I don't want the feeling to end." He pulled a small gift-wrapped box from his jacket pocket.

"When I bought this, it was meant to be a friendship ring of sorts." He tore off the paper, opened the box and removed a gold ring. Holly could see the glitter of diamonds.

"It was an impulsive gesture, but by now you know I give in to my impulses." He touched her wool cap, then caressed the waves of hair that framed her face. "I'm glad I did, because I'm asking you to marry me, Holly. I never want this feeling of fulfillment to end."

Long seconds passed before she found her voice.

"I'm sorry. Nick, I want to say yes..."

"You just did."

"No, no, that wasn't yes."

"I love you. I'm sure of that. For the first time in my life I want to make a commitment."

"Nick, you can't be sure of anything. It's the season. For the past six weeks we've been living in another time zone. The delusional zone. Holiday time. We can't trust our feelings. I'm worried that I've been using you, both you and Emmett, to fill this void in my life." She rested her palms against the front of his

jacket. "I've been trying to have the ideal Christmas as long as I can remember—"

"Wasn't it ideal?" Nick was smiling, an odd, gentle expression that

tugged at her heart.

"Of course, it was wonderful, Nick. I might go on thinking that for a few days or a week, but then I'll be faced with this painful reality."

"What reality?"

"Christmas forces us to be perfect people for a day and to create expectations we feel obliged to fulfill."

"Is that so wrong?"

"Yes!" Her tone was more emphatic than she intended. "We're forced to confront who we are and what we want, where we're going. Now you're forcing me to think about the issue of marriage. I can't, Nick. Let me enjoy the rest of this day. For once in my life maybe all the wonderful feelings will last."

"They will." He touched her cheek. "Trust me. In the meantime, Holly, would you accept this as a

ring of friendship?"

She looked down at the slim golden band, seeing the details of the wheat pattern for the first time. "The wheat like in the Croatian ceremony, the ties to your roots. I'll wear it, Nick, in friendship."

She watched with misted eyes as he slipped it onto her finger. "Do you realize this is where we met?" she asked softly. "Right here by the woodshed? Did you propose marriage here intentionally?"

"No." Nick pulled her into his arms. "Impulse again." He sighed.

"I was hoping you'd say yes, Holly, to make my Christmas complete."

"I didn't say yes or no, Nick. I love you. I want you to understand it's not you I distrust. It's the season."

"EMMETT, you feeling all right?" Nick stepped into the older man's bedroom where Emmett sat, holding the gold star Nick had given him.

"I'm fine," Emmett said with a

sigh.

"Feeling a little down?" Nick sat opposite him. "The ice is melting. According to the radio, the roads should be clear by tomorrow."

"Yep." Emmett nodded. "We got lights and hot meals and a warm house. I've appreciated your being here. Been three whole days. You and Holly can get back to your separate lives."

"Emmett, what's bothering you?"

"She turned down your marriage proposal. I was feedin' the birds out back. I heard." Emmett stopped spinning the star and looked up at Nick. "I'm not one to butt into other people's personal business, but you two are special to me, and I'd like to see you settle down together."

Emmett stood up. He handed the star to Nick, then walked to the bedroom window.

"She didn't say no, Emmett. We're going to wait a little while, give it some time."

"Give it some time? Don't be foolish, Nick. Listen to someone who learned firsthand about time. This could go on for weeks, months,

a year. Maybe you two need some incentive."

"What do you mean?"

"A symbol of hope that your love will prevail." Emmett stood erect. "I've got it. I'm not takin' my Christmas tree down till you two agree to get married."

NICK HELD the registered letter in his hand. For two days he'd been struggling with complicated legal and business details regarding the merger that would open up his design programs for international distribution. So he welcomed this interruption.

Dear Mr. Petrovich,
Thank you for being so understanding on the phone when I spoke to you in December. I want you to know I'm getting closer to making a decision about journeying to Portland to visit Emmett Snow.

Ever since the investigator contacted me, Emmett's been on my mind. We had such wonderful times together.

Mr. Petrovich, if you could write and describe the type of reception I might expect from Emmett, it would help in my decision.

There's another matter I hope you can help me with. You've mentioned Holly Peterson, your fellow volunteer who does total make-overs. If I decide to visit Portland to see Emmett, I would be in need of her services. Thank you very much.
Sincerely,
Delilah Carpenter

Nick reread the letter. How could he anticipate Emmett's reaction to the sight of Delilah on his doorstep? Forty years had passed.

"It's not you I distrust. It's the season."

There was nothing predictable about Holly Peterson's response to the question he'd asked on Christmas day. She had feared the warmth and magic of the holidays would end. Four weeks had passed, and the illusion, as Holly had called it, showed no signs of dissipating.

Nick looked down at the letter in his hand. No, it was different for Emmett and Delilah. Emmett had chosen his career and family responsibility. He had loved and lost. There was no similarity.

"MY GOODNESS, you're going for the total treatment, Lily." Holly glanced down at her client's schedule card.

"Massage, manicure, pedicure, facial, hair color and styling, makeup consultation and wardrobe." The white-haired woman sitting in the salon chair counted off the appointments on her fingers as she listed them. "I intend to end this day feeling totally renewed, but don't get me wrong. I'm also a realist."

"What do you mean?"

"I've always believed changes have to come from within, and I've worked on that." The older woman stared intently at Holly's reflection in the mirror. But I still want to take forty years off the sixty-five I've lived."

"Sixty-five? You look far younger. You're very attractive, Lily. Everyone needs to be pampered now and then, but you hardly need lessons on how to enhance your hair and face. It must be a special occasion."

"I'm not at liberty to discuss my personal life." Lily looked down at her hands. "You see, I have a benefactor. He insisted on treating me to this, and one of the conditions is that I not discuss the particulars with anyone. Especially here at the salon."

"You realize you're bound to make everyone twice as curious, don't you?"

"Of course. But isn't that the fun of it?"

When the make-over was completed, Lily praised the staff effusively, then turned to Holly. "Time for our shopping trip."

"Oh, I'm not the clothing consultant. That's Phyllis—"

"But I want you to come with me. The important thing is that I like you. Judging from your appearance, you have good taste. Let's start shopping. Now I'm a size ten, and I hate drab colors, or anything shockingly bright."

Holly glanced down at the amount listed on Lily's schedule card. "You could buy every color of the rainbow and a nun's habit with this allowance."

"Ignore it. I have no intention of taking advantage of my benefactor. I need five things, Holly. A good coat for this Portland weather, a sweater, wool slacks, a dress that fits the miracle your salon just performed, and lots of beautiful lingerie."

"YOU'RE EARLY," Nick whispered into Holly's ear as he welcomed her at the door.

"Traffic was light, the elevator was empty..." She paused when he leaned against the wall and stroked her back. "And I'm always anxious to see you, Nick. What time are we supposed to go over to Emmett's?"

"Six-thirty."

"He's so excited about your surprise. Imagine discovering one of Delilah's films on tape. Emmett thought he'd seen them all."

"I have the scene cued up if you'd like a sneak preview. Come into the

living room and sit down."

Holly slipped out of her coat and settled on the sofa. Though she rarely talked about her work, she was anxious to tell Nick about her mysterious client.

"You'll love this. It's one of those great entrance scenes that Delilah does so well," Nick promised. He lifted the remote but, instead of pointing it at the VCR, he aimed it toward the far end of the living room. A woman stepped through the kitchen entrance into the dim light of the larger room.

"Lily!" Holly choked the name out. "Oh, my God. Are you Emmett's Delilah?"

"Now, now, darling. Treat me like a professional, and let me complete my entrance scene. I'm rather proud of what we accomplished today," Delilah said with a laugh. She bent down to kiss both Holly and Nick on the cheek.

"Beautiful," Nick applauded softly.

"I can't believe it." Holly placed her hand between Nick's palms. "You orchestrated all of this without telling me?"

"I assumed you'd feel it was too extravagant a gesture." Nick stood and gently pulled Holly to her feet. "And I didn't want to get your hopes up if things didn't work out."

"But they did." Lily hugged Holly. "Let's hurry. I'm saving my grand entrance for Emmett."

"Well, cue the fool tape so I can get a look at Delilah. What year did you say this movie was released?" Emmett took the video cassette from Nick. "What's the title? The R-reunion of Em-mett and Delilah? Nick, what the hell—"

Nick opened the front door with a flourish. Delilah stood on the threshold, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Emmett!" She raised a hand to her mouth and smothered the small cry that followed. Nick touched her elbow and helped her into the living room.

Emmett took a step toward them. "I don't believe my eyes. It's you, it's really you, Delilah?"

"In the flesh," Nick answered.
"This is a belated Christmas surprise, Emmett."

Delilah and Emmett embraced awkwardly at first, then in a fierce caress. They became completely absorbed with each other, and Nick turned, looking at the lone figure in the entryway. Tears streaked Holly's cheeks. He took her in his arms, massaging her back in wide comforting circles.

"You'll forgive me the extrava-

gance, won't you?"

"Of course, you can't put a price tag on love or friendship. It's the most unselfish, wonderful thing you've ever done."

Weaving her fingers through his hair, she drew his lips down on hers. The kiss was gentle, a whisper against his mouth. Nick closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of Holly's body against his own. Glancing into the living room was a bit like staring in a mirror—a man and woman embracing, talking softly.

"Perhaps you two need some time alone," Nick suggested. "Holly and

I will start some coffee."

"EMMETT's raising his voice," Holly noted, taking another bite of apple from the fruit-and-cheese platter they'd prepared.

"So I hear. Delilah isn't exactly whispering, either." Nick topped a

cracker with a slice of Brie.

"Do you think we should bring the coffee and the food out now or give them more time?"

"I don't want to interfere." Nick popped a grape into his mouth. "After forty years they probably have a lot to discuss."

The voices from the living room grew louder. Nick paced the kitchen floor, studying the tiles intently. "Sounds like Emmett blames Dellah for not letting him know how badly she wanted her own career."

Holly nodded. "Now she's denying it. She thinks he was too devoted to the family business—" Holly nibbled on a piece of kiwi fruit "—and he wasn't impulsive or passionate enough to pursue her."

There was an interlude of quiet as both listened to the conversation.

"Why do you think we feel compelled to do this play-by-play instant replay?" Nick asked.

"We probably want to tie their problems up in a neat easy-to-solve

package."

"Maybe. Come on, Emmett," Nick murmured. "Don't be so stubborn. Can't you put the past behind you?"

"I feel like I did when I was a kid, listening to my parents fight. Do Croatians argue?"

Nick stared at Holly in surprise. "Are you serious? I know I'm even tempered, but we've had our moments—"

"I mean your parents. Did they lock horns now and then?"

"Sure." Nick finished the last of the cheese. "They argued about money, because there was never enough. And they argued about me. You know, normal, run-of-the-mill arguments."

Emmett and Delilah's voices competed for dominance in the next room. Nick looked back at Holly.

"Now you and me, we'd never argue about money or careers or parenting. Never." He approached the counter where she sat. "Because we love each other too much, and we know it's not worth the heartache."

Nick stepped up to the kitchen counter, placing a palm on either

side of her legs, and then leaned forward until his face was inches from hers. His eyes were warm and searching, his expression expectant.

Holly looked down to avoid his

intense gaze.

"We shouldn't be having this dis-

cussion, Nick. It's silly."

"We're having this discussion," Nick spoke from between clenched teeth, "because we're both upset that Delilah and Emmett are fighting, and we're both afraid she might go back to California. We love him, and we don't want to see him hurt."

"Then maybe we should take the damn fruit-and-cheese platter to the

living room!"

"Nice idea, Holly." Nick backed away. "But we ate the bleeping fruitand-cheese platter, and all we can offer is coffee and four grapes."

"Fine! That's one grape for each of us and a gallon of coffee!"

Nick held up his palms. "Let's calm down. Both of us. First tell me why you're so upset?"

"Because I'm not ready to make

a decision, Nick!"

"I know. You're waiting until our commitment to Emmett ends. You're afraid your perfect Christmas was an illusion that won't last. Holly, I know every excuse by heart! I've been patient, and I'll continue to be patient, but dammit, Holly, it can't be Christmas forever."

"Oh, dear." A female voice came from the doorway. "Perhaps you two need to be alone." Delilah and Emmett were standing in the kitchen doorway, their eyes full of concern.

"Why don't the both of you head on home now?" Emmett said. "Delilah and I are having a great time catchin' up on things. I can call a cab to take her back to her hotel. No need for the two of you to wait on us. We could be up all night. It's a wonderful thing you've done, giving us this chance to renew our friendship."

"There's coffee ready if you care for some," Nick said, quietly reaching out to shake Emmett's hand. "You two take some time out for the happy memories, okay?"

"You're giving us advice?"

The tension between Holly and Nick eased slightly when they joined the other couple in laughter. They said their goodbyes in the kitchen. On the way out, Holly couldn't help looking at the drooping boughs of the dying tree. Had it become a symbol of her undying love for Nick, or would her love die with the tree?

Nick waited for her in the entryway. He smiled at her, that wonder-

ful, gentle, mystical smile.

"We just had a very stupid argument." She took a deep breath and exhaled. "Nick, I think it might be a good idea if we spend some time apart."

"Not see each other at all?"

"I'm not sure. Our agreement with Emmett is almost over. I think we should share time together here, but—"

"But you don't want to share a bed with me until you have things straightened out in your mind?"

"I know it sounds cold and calculating, but I need to distance myself, get my thoughts straight." "And what about me? I told you in the kitchen I've been more than patient. There's a limit, Holly."

"I'd rather spend my nights with you, Nick, but it's too painful now.

I need time."

"And I need you, Holly." Nick put his hands on the doorknob. "What's it going to be?"

"We'll have to take that decision one day at a time."

NICK maneuvered his Mercedes around one of West Hills' winding curves. Emmett had called that morning, asking him to drop by the house.

Seven days ago, just half a week after the reunion with Delilah, Emmett had formally asked both Nick and Holly to suspend their visits, saying he needed time to rekindle his friendship with Delilah in private.

It had been more than ten days since Nick had seen Holly, when they'd had that ridiculous argument in Emmett's kitchen. He'd been tempted to send flowers, balloons, candy—even a singing clown, but none of those gifts could say what was in his heart. In the end, he had written her a simple love letter.

When Nick pulled up in front of Emmett's home, Holly's empty van was parked out front. Emmett an-

swered the door.

"Come on in. Holly's in the living room, and I was about to go upstairs to find out what's keeping Delilah. I'll be back in a minute."

Holly was standing beside the withered tree, watching Nick with a solemn expression.

"Good morning, Nick." Her tone was warm but not effusive. "I see Emmett called you, too."

"About an hour ago. I guess they're ready to see us again. How have you been?"

She looked down at the carpet. "I've missed you."

"If I said that I'd missed you, Holly, it would be an understatement." He stepped closer, longing to touch her cheek. "You look so damn beautiful right now with your hair shining like copper in the sunlight and those haunting gray eyes. Why don't we just forget everything that's hanging between us, drive to the coast and go back to that bed-and-breakfast place in Astoria where we stayed in January?"

"Nick-"

"Forgive me, Holly, I'm an incurable romantic."

"I know, and I hope they never find the cure." Holly cast a furtive glance at the stairway. "About Emmett and Delilah, should we treat them like friends or lovers? I don't want to make any assumptions, and I don't want to belittle Delilah's marriage by implying—"

"Don't worry." Nick cleared his throat. "The private investigator said Clarence turned out to be a womanizer and a skunk. Delilah filed for a legal separation, and they lived apart for more than ten years before he died."

"That's sad, Nick."

Seconds later, there were footsteps on the stairs and Delilah made a sweeping entrance, followed by Emmett. Delilah hugged Holly and Nick. "It's so good to see you. I think Emmett has something he wants to say."

Emmett looked down at the floor for a moment, then up at Holly and Nick. "I called the two of you this morning because I wanted to tell you that Delilah will be going back to California very soon. I'll be going with her. We're getting married, and she wants her kids there to see it."

"Thank God," Nick sighed. "We weren't sure whether to treat you like friends or lovers."

"We're both," Emmett said firmly. "We've wiped away the years. Only friends can do that. My one regret is that the two of you can't seem to agree on what you want—"Emmett paused, staring at the top of the tree. "The star is gone!"

Nick looked up at the pitiful rem-

nant. "Holly?"

"Do you know what day this is?" she asked him.

"The last day of February. The end of our written commitment to Emmett, but it doesn't really have to end, Holly."

"No, it doesn't, but we probably won't see much of Emmett and Delilah. They'll be on their honeymoon—and we'll be on ours."

"You mean?"

"It's time to take the tree down, Nick. You were right." She reached into her jacket for the star of tinsel. "I got your letter, Nick. I was happy because you chose to express yourself without flowers or extravagant gifts.

"And because everything you said was true." She ran her fingers over

the shimmering surface of the star. "It can't be Christmas forever. There's the first day of spring and the last day of summer, the harvest moon and a myriad of other reasons to celebrate special days. They can all hold the same holiday magic I've been looking for all my life, and they will, Nick—because I love you."

She placed the star in his upturned palm as tears spilled onto her cheeks. "Sretna Nova Godina," he whispered.

"You'll have to translate that for me," Holly said softly. "It might take me years to learn Croatian."

"It means Happy New Year, Holly, but it could mean new month, new day, new beginnings. I intend to share them all with you, love. Forever."



STAR SIGNS—NOVEMBER & DECEMBER



CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

Someone is not being truthful with you, but just how to sort them out is a major concern at the moment. Enlist the help of a close friend, as her support will help you be strong at the right moment.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

Something new is on the horizon changing your life in many ways and making real progress possible. Having made your choice, you should feel refreshed and ready for action.



PISCES February 23-March 22

There seems to be an air of doubt circling around you, but if you never try to achieve the things you hold dear, then nothing will ever be gained. A friend offers help that, if taken, could cut your work load in half and help you realize that you are valued.



ARIES March 23-April 22

A lucky month in which it seems little can go wrong. Relax and enjoy the company of friends and loved ones who are happy to help you celebrate your good fortune. Toward the end of the month an interesting proposal causes you to rethink the direction your life is taking.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

Things may not be turning out quite the way you had planned. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing, as you tend not to aim high enough in your ambitions. Romance is well aspected, and you could be making a stronger commitment to a special person.



GEMINI May 23-June 21

A wave of impulsiveness makes you prone to uncharacteristic mistakes. You must try to get back on an even keel by establishing a more stable base during this month. A family reunion or celebration provides a high spot and ends the month in a more positive way than it started.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



CANCER June 22-July 22

An excellent month in which you can make real progress in many areas of your life. Romantic interludes add to the general feeling of happiness that surrounds you at the moment. A letter or phone call late in the month could cause you to change your plans at the last minute.



LEO July 23-August 22

You will need all your wits about you if you are to avoid being caught out. Someone is out to cause mischief, and although you know their motives, others may be more gullible. Toward the end of the month your fortunes change.



VIRGO August 23-September 22

There is potential for change, but it depends on you being brave enough to take on the world. Money matters need sorting, but a stroke of luck midmonth will help your budget considerably.



LIBRA September 23-October 22

There's no substitute for information. You can assume as much as you like but by communicating with those around you, you will quickly understand just what is happening. A romantic interlude toward the end of the month will lift spirits.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

Time to take a few risks, but make sure you have taken all reasonable precautions first. A friend calls in a favor and this could have favorable consequences for you, too.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

Career moves go well, with those that really matter noticing your increased efficiency. You will be in demand with friends, and romance continues to go well, making this a happy and relaxed month.

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READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #27

ACROSS

- 1. Health club
- 4. ___ and that
- 8. Sudden fancy
- 12. Relation
- 13. Angel's instrument
- 14. Man of the hour
- 15. Obstructing
- 17. Andy's pal
- 18. Noah's boat
- 19. Slope
- 20. Corner
- 23. Kermit's color 25. Booty
- 26. Pork cut
- 27. ___ Quixote 30. Place for
- 30. Place for three men
- 31. Dracula's title
- 32. Garden tool
- 33. Hole in _
- 34. Difficult
- 35. Labyrinth
- 36. Pulverize
- 38. Embroidered 39. Merlin's
- specialty
- 41. That girl 42. Dry, as a desert
- 43. Knock that off!
- 48. "Of Thee I ___
- 49. Author unknown: abbr.
- 50. Cigar residue
- 51. Wise man
- 52. Vatican leader
- 53. Piano lever

DOWN

- 1. Glide on snow
- 2. Metal fastener
- 3. Picnic pest
- 4. At that place
- 5. Bird of prey
- 6. Mr. Gershwin
- 7. Secret agent
- 8. Moby Dick, e.g.
- 9. Avoid direct answers
- 10. Potential steel
- 11. Greatest amount
- 16. Sentry's command
- 19. Forwarded

- 20. Palo __
- 21. Part of speech
- 22. Be unwanted
- 23. Squash's relative
- 24. Fruit skin
- 26. Borrowed
- 28. Leak out slowly
- 29. Require
- 31. Stylish
- 35. Encounter
- 37. Elevation 38. Glow
- 39. Bulk
- 40. Opera highlight

- 41. Hit the brakes
- 43. Bottletop
- 44. Numero ____ 45. Timber tree
- 45. Timber tree 46. Utilize
- 47. Biblical
 - pronoun

Solution on page 73

of this issue.

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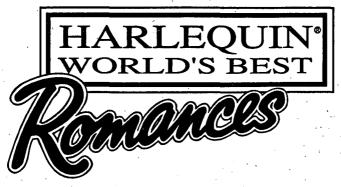
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MURIEL JENSEN—A Carol Christmas

To Carol, Christmas was a time of agonizing loss. But with Saint Christopher's Home for Children closing down in the New Year, she was determined to seal up her painful memories and make this a Christmas to remember for her five hard-to-adopt dorm kids. Ex-baseball star Mike Rafferty could help make her kids' Christmas dreams come true...and maybe a few of her own, as well.

CELESTE HAMILTON—The Diamond's Sparkle

Public relations man Nathan Hollister lived his life the same way he drove his car...in the fast lane. Until he met beautiful Liz Patterson. Would she be the one obstacle that slowed him down?

JUDITH ARNOLD—Comfort and Joy

As far as divorcée Robin Greer was concerned, there could never be enough Christmas. Having been shifted around throughout much of her life, home and traditions were the roots of her happiness. Christmas was having the tree in the same corner every year and baking cookies with her seven-year-old son, Philip. But in the end, when it looked as if she'd have no reason to celebrate the big day, it took an avowed atheist and Scrooge like Jesse Lawson to teach her the true meaning of Christmas joy.

NOREEN BROWNLIE—'Tis the Season

Volunteering to bring Christmas cheer to an elderly person hadn't prepared Holly Peterson for fellow volunteer Nick Petrovich. Nick wanted much more than a fleeting holiday enchantment....

MILLION DOLLAR SWEEPSTAKES (III)

No purchase necessary. To enter, follow the directions published. Method of entry may vary. For eligibility, entries must be received no later than March 31, 1996. No liability is assumed for printing errors, lost, late or misdirected entries. Odds of winning are determined by the number of eligible entries distributed and received. Prizewinners will be determined no later than June 30, 1996.

Sweepstakes open to residents of the U.S. (except Puerto Rico), Canada, Europe and Taiwan who are 18 years of age or older. All applicable laws and regulations apply. Sweepstakes offer void wherever prohibited by law. Values of all prizes are in U.S. currency. This sweepstakes is presented by Torstar Corp., its subsidiaries and affiliates, in conjunction with book, merchandise and/or product offerings. For a copy of the Official Rules send a self-addressed, stamped envelope (WA residents need not affix return postage) to: MILLION DOLLAR SWEEPSTAKES (III) Rules, P.O. Box 4573, Blair, NE 68009, USA.

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No purchase necessary. The Extra Bonus Prize will be awarded in a random drawing to be conducted no later than 5/30/96 from among all entries received. To qualify, entries must be received by 3/31/96 and comply with published directions. Drawing open to residents of the U.S. (except Puerto Rico), Canada, Europe and Taiwan who are 18 years of age or older. All applicable laws and regulations apply; offer void wherever prohibited by law. Odds of winning are dependent upon number of eligibile entries received. Prize is valued in U.S. currency. The offer is presented by Torstar Corp., its subsidiaries and affiliates in conjunction with book, merchandise and/or product offering. For a copy of the Official Rules governing this sweepstakes, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope (WA residents need not affix return postage) to: Extra Bonus Prize Drawing Rules, P.O. Box 4590, Blair, NE 68009, USA.

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If I'm the winner, I'll take the [] Hawaiian Vacation! [] British Isles Tour! [] Carnival in Rio!

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In and Jaughter Extra Bonus PRIZE EXTRAVAGANZA!

Isn't it romantic! A fabulous dream vacation for two to the destination of your choice! Read about your vacation options below, then indicate your choice on the reply card and mail it promptly! If you're selected as the Extra Bonus Prize winner, you'll win the vacation of a lifetime PLUS \$40,000.00 in bonus cash to greet you on your return!

Which vacation would you prefer?



HAWAII—Ah, paradise! This 14-day/13-night vacation includes round-trip airfare for two to Honolulu, interisland flights to Maui, first-class beachfront hotels, rental car and \$1,000.00 spending money!

BRITISH ISLES—Travel to England and Scotland for a 14-day/13-night vacation of a lifetime! Prize includes round-trip airfare for two to London, rail passage to Edinburgh, rental car, first-class hotels in both London and Edinburgh and \$1,000.00 spending money!





RIO—You and your companion will fly to Brazil's romantic oceanfront city, Rio de Janeiro, for a 14-day/13-night vacation you'll never forget. If you go during Carnival time (Mardi Gras), you'll enjoy Rio's famous parades and nonstop partying. Vacation includes round-trip airfare, a first-class beachfront hotel and \$1,000.00 spending money!

Don't miss out! Indicate your vacation choice on the reply card, and mail it promptly!

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